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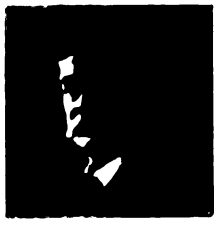

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FIRST SERIES

THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE," "THE RYE HOUSE PLOT," "MARY STUART," "OMAR, A TALE OF THE WAR," "MARY PRICE," "JOSEPH WILMOT," "ELLEN PERCY," ETC., ETC.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS.

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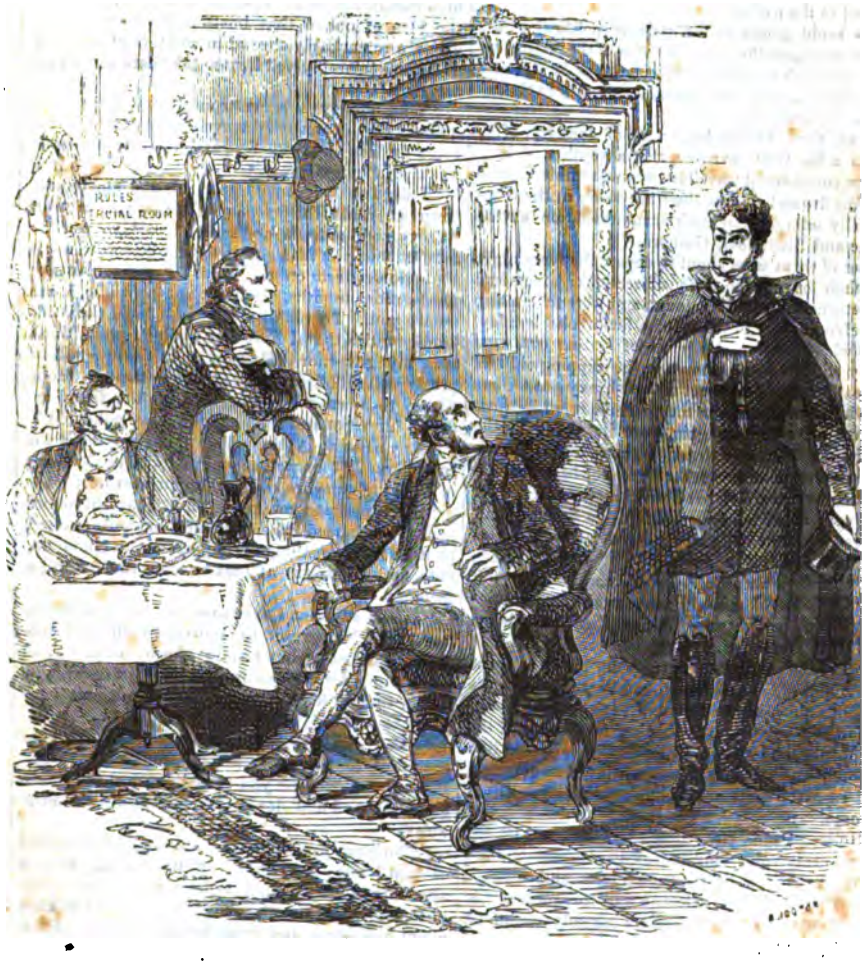
THE MYSTERIES
OF
THE COURT OF LONDON.



CHAPTER I.

THE CATALOGUE OF CRIMES.

Our narrative opens in the month of January, 1795, —a date belonging to one of the most eventful periods in the history of Great Britain, or indeed of Europe.

At that time King George III was in the thirty fifth year of his reign; and his scape-grace son, th Prince of Wales, was already verging towards the important climacteric which is usually denominate "the prime of life"—his age being thirty-three.

Pitt was then in power: the Reign of Terror ha

just closed in Paris, leaving the French Republic in the hands of the Jacobins and the Thermidorians;—and the English armies, under the Duke of York, had reaped nothing but disgrace from the previous campaigns in the Netherlands

The memorable trial of Warren Hastings was then in progress: that of Hardy, Tooke, and Thelwall, the people's staunch champions, had recently terminated in a glorious triumph.

The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended: for democratic opinions were spreading rapidly throughout England—and the doctrine of "the divine right of Kings" was falling to a miserable discount.

The Ministers were demanding more money to carry on the war against France;—Wilberforce was agitating the question of the slave-trade:—and the approaching marriage of the Prince of Wales with the Princess Caroline of Brunswick had been announced to the nation.

This rapid glance at the state of political affairs will not only give the reader an idea of the interesting period at which our tale commences, but is likewise in certain points an indispensable preface to the incidents that are to follow

It was, then, in the beginning of January, 1795, and on a fine frosty evening, that a number of bagmen, or commercial travellers, were assembled round a blazing fire and sipping their hot toddy in the room especially set apart for their accommodation at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.

Some of them were about to depart that very night upon their journeys in various directions: others had just returned from long tours, and were felicitating themselves on the prospect of a few weeks' holiday. Those who were on the point of setting out, were already equipped to encounter the nipping chill of the weather, save in respect to their heavy great-coats which hung to the pegs in the apartment; while those who had come home again, were indulging in the luxurious indolence of dressing-gowns and slippers.

The conversation was general: for the bag-men, frequenting that tavern, were all well known to each other—and even when a new-comer in the "profession" appeared amongst them, their convivial heartiness of disposition and frank hospitality of character soon placed him on terms of ease and familiarity. For there is no class of men more generous nor more intellectual and enlightened, taking them as a body, than that of commercial travellers.

It was between six and seven o'clock on the evening of which we are speaking, and the bag-men were in the middle of a warm though perfectly good-tempered discussion on some political subject, when the door opened, and a short, thin man, who looked like a locomotive mummy, so completely was he enveloped in great-coats and "comforters," bustled into the room.

"Hollos, Page—old fellow—how are you?" exclaimed every voice simultaneously; and the demand was made with a heartiness of tone and manner which indicated how welcome was the presence of this new arrival to the travellers already assembled at the George and Blue Boar.

"As well as ever, and as hungry as a hunter," responded Mr. Page, who, by the assistance of the active waiter, immediately began to extricate himself from the mass of upper clothing which he wore. "But it is a precious sharp evening, I can tell you! The roads are as hard as iron, and the air is what might be called quite *crisp*. Now, John," he continued, as he threw aside the large woollen article that had enveloped his neck, turning at the same time towards the waiter whom he thus addressed, "get me a nice steak and oyster sauce; and send *Boots* with a pair of slippers."

"Yes, sir," replied the waiter, immediately afterwards disappearing to execute the commissions specified

Room was now made for Mr. Page near the fire; and, having taken his seat, he held his hands close to the cheerful grate until a genial warmth began to pervade his form. He was a man of about five-and-forty, with a thin, sallow, and angular countenance, small restless grey eyes, and a good set of teeth. His forehead was remarkably high, and his head was bald on the crown; but on each side the bushy iron grey hair stuck out, mingling with the whiskers which, of a somewhat darker hue, met underneath his chin. His whole appearance gave the idea of one of that bustling kind of persons who are remarkably shrewd in matters of business and know tolerably well how to take care of "Number One."

"Where do you come from to-day, Page?" inquired the commercial traveller who had made room for him near the fire, and next to whom he was therefore seated.

"I slept at Aylesbury last night, and started for town at nine this morning," was the answer "Forty good miles is not such a bad day's work, take it: but you know that I don't drive the worst bit of horse-flesh on the road. I've been out for the last four months, and have not been idle, I can assure you. There are few places in all the Midland counties that I have not visited; and I think that my governors, Hodson and Morley, will be pretty well satisfied when I call upon them in Wood Street to-morrow morning with all the fresh orders I have got and the monies I have collected."

"Any news up Aylesbury way?" asked one of the travellers. "I am well acquainted with all that part of Buckinghamshire, and feel an interest in it."

"Then perhaps you know Sir Richard Stamford—eh?" exclaimed Page, becoming suddenly excited as if he had something of importance to communicate, and which was at that moment revived in his memory.

"I can't say that I ever saw Sir Richard, to my knowledge," answered the individual who had previously spoken: "but I know him by name and all about him, as well as we may be aware of everything in the life of King George himself, without ever having seen his Majesty."

"Then you don't consider Sir Richard Stamford to be a very wealthy man?" cried Mr Page: "and may be you have heard that he is a good husband-kind deeply attached to his beautiful wife?"

"Those are precisely the opinions I have formed of him," was the reply. "His country seat is about three miles from Aylesbury; and I never was in that town without hearing the people speaking about him—aye, and most favourably too. He is reported to spend a deal of money in the place, and to do a world of good in the shape of charity. Besides, he has a large share in Ramsey and Martin's bank, which is noted for the accommodation it affords the tradesmen of the town and the farmers in all that district of Bucks."

"Is n't it wonderful," exclaimed Page, his sallow

countenance assuming a mysterious aspect, while all his listeners gazed upon him in mingled curiosity and amazement,—"is n't it wonderful," he repeated, "how the world *may* be deceived by outward appearances—and how a man *may* pass off for years as a saint, whereas in his heart he is a very demon all the time?"

"But what has all this to do with Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded several voices.

"What has it all to do with *him*?" cried Page, casting a still more solemn and mysterious glance around upon the company: "why, just this—that when I came down to breakfast in the coffee-room at the inn where I put up at Aylesbury, I heard that the whole town was in consternation; for such a complication of crimes ——"

"Crimes!" repeated several of the commercial travellers, drawing their chairs nearer to the speaker.

"What?—and in connexion with Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded the individual who had previously expressed his interest in all that concerned Aylesbury.

"Yes—crimes, and in connexion with Sir Richard Stamford," resumed Page: "for this baronet who, as our friend here just now stated, was famous for his charities and was a sleeping-partner in the principal bank in the place—this gentleman of whom every body entertained such a high opinion——"

"Well—well: what has he done?" cried several impatient voices.

"Rather ask me what he has *not* done," said Page: "for surely all possible crimes are summed up in fraud—forgery—murder—and arson!"

"Good heaven!" ejaculated the bag-men, literally bounding upon their chairs; while the sentiments of horror, amazement, doubt, and curiosity congealed into lines on all their countenances: "you cannot be in earnest!"

"I never was more in earnest in my life, friends," responded Page, emphatically.

"But explain—tell us how it happened," exclaimed one.

"So many crimes!" observed another.

"And all to be perpetrated by one man!" cried a third.

"It is scarcely probable!" remarked a fourth.

"You will cease to be sceptical when you see to-morrow morning's newspapers," said Page, shaking his head solemnly. "I tell you that Sir Richard Stamford, baronet," he continued in a measured and decisive tone, "has taken in every tradesman at Aylesbury—committed endless forgeries on the bank in which he is a partner—assassinated his beautiful wife—and set fire to his own splendid country-seat."

"God help us!" cried many voices.

"I did not succeed in obtaining many particulars relative to this fearful catalogue of crimes," continued Mr. Page; "for the persons with whom I conversed in the coffee-room at Aylesbury, were all talking at once, each giving his own version of the complicated affair, and every one of these tales differing from the rest. But the outline of the dreadful tragedy appeared to be something in this shape,—that Mr. Martin, one of the banking-firm being absent, Mr. Ramsey, the other partner, discovered last evening the forgeries which Sir Richard Stamford had committed,—that he went straight off to Stamford Manor to demand explanations, but that the baronet being out at the time, he communicated the object of his visit to Lady Stamford,—that a little after midnight Sir Richard returned home, and was assailed by violent reproaches on the part of Mr. Ramsey and bitter upbraidings from her ladyship, who was half distracted at the terrible discovery of her husband's guilt,—and that in his rage the baronet forcibly expelled Ramsey from the house, killed his wife in a paroxysm of fury, and having set fire to the Manor, doubtless for the purpose of concealing the deed of blood, immediately absconded."

"The man must be a perfect monster!" ejaculated the commercial traveller who was so well acquainted with Aylesbury. "I have often seen Mr. Ramsey at the bank: he is a handsome young man of some eight or nine and twenty, and very affable. At his father's death he became head of the firm, and is universally beloved in the town and district."

"I suppose there will be a reward offered for the apprehension of the baronet!" observed another of the bag-men,

"*Of* course there will," responded Mr. Page;—"and a full description of his person will be published."

"Have you ever seen him?" inquired the previous speaker.

"Two or three times," answered Page. "He bears a remarkable likeness *to* the Royal Family; and people *do* say that when his Gracious Majesty was Prince of Wales and so mysteriously connected with the beautiful Quakeress Hannah Lightfoot——"

The remainder of the sentence was interrupted by the sudden entrance of the waiter laden with the dinner which Mr. Page had ordered; and as this worthy gentleman had been rendered almost ravenous by the sharp frosty air, he desisted from farther observations in order to address himself to the succulent steak, rich oyster-sauce, and smoking potatoes which were now served up.

The presence of the waiter reminded those bag-men who were to set out that evening of the necessity of calling for their bills without delay; and the conversation relative to the tragical occurrences near Aylesbury was accordingly interrupted by the bustle attendant on settling scores, remunerating waiters and chamber-maids, putting on great-coats and comforters, filling flasks with brandy, lighting cigars, shaking hands with those who remained behind, and all the usual ceremonies attendant upon departure.

At length the room was cleared of two-thirds of the commercial travellers; and as some of those who had just returned from their journeys were compelled to retire to their chambers in order to prepare their accounts and papers for inspection by their employers on the morrow, Mr. Page shortly found himself left with only two companions out of a dozen.

With those friends however he presently renewed the conversation, one of them having asked him what he was about to say when the appearance of the waiter had interrupted him.

"Oh! I remember the topic on which I was speaking," exclaimed the talkative Mr. Page, pushing away his plate after having made a hearty dinner: "I was going to observe that when his Majesty was Prince of Wales, he became connected with a certain Quakeress, named Hannah Lightfoot. Some say he privately married her; and it has also been rumoured

that there was a son born. This child—according to the same vague authority—was secretly removed to the house of the late Sir William and Lady Stamford and adopted by them, her ladyship's own infant happening to die at the period. All this I heard at Aylesbury—but of course I don't pretend in any way to vouch for it."

"I should think not, indeed!" exclaimed a gentleman who, entering the apartment at the instant, but unperceived by the commercial travellers, had caught the latter portion of Mr. Page's observations.

The bag-men started as those words, uttered in a tone of mingled imperiousness and contempt, fell upon their ears; and turning round they beheld the new-comer from whose lips the disdainful remark had fallen.

He was an individual of remarkably imposing appearance. His features were handsome, though his countenance was now evidently flushed with wine: his figure was tall, well proportioned, and commanding:—and in his gait and gestures there was an easy elegance combined with a nobility of air which bespoke the polished gentleman. The intellectuality of his face would have however been somewhat marred by its roundness, the gracefulness of the oval being destroyed by the fatness of the cheeks,—had not the high and open forehead redeemed the fault. His hair was of that uncertain colour which appears of a dark chesnut in some lights, and auburn in others; and it was naturally curled and wavy. His age seemed to be a few years over thirty; and his attire was neat, good, but unpretending.

Such was the individual who made the above-mentioned remark as he entered the commercial-room at the George and Blue Boar; and taking off his hat, cloak, and warm gloves, he seated himself at a table.

Almost immediately afterwards the waiter made his appearance with a steaming tumbler of rum-punch, which the gentleman had ordered as he passed the bar.

But from the first instant that the stranger had met the eyes of Mr. Page, this worthy individual had not ceased to stare at him. It was not however with the offensive gaze of impertinent curiosity; nor was it the rude survey of coarse vulgarity:—but it was the fixed contemplation of one who is suddenly struck by a resemblance, and who fancies he knows the object of his scrutiny, yet on the other hand feels almost certain that he must be mistaken.

At this juncture the other two commercial travellers, rose and retired; and Mr. Page was left alone with the stranger.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLIGHT AND THE PURSUIT.

We should observe that hitherto the gentleman whom we are still compelled to denominate "the stranger," had not noticed the searching earnestness of gaze with which the bag-man regarded him: indeed, no sooner had he taken his seat at the table, when he appeared to fall into a profound reverie,—as if totally forgetting the observation he had made on entering—the words which had elicited it—and the presence of any one else in the room.

Mr. Page, feeling that his survey of the stranger would be deemed an impertinence, if remarked, turned towards the fire, which he poked vigorously then he took a few sips of whiskey-and-water, and tried to make himself comfortable. But there was a feeling of uneasiness upon him, which rapidly grew more painful; and in a few minutes he found that he was again staring at the gentleman more intently than at first.

"It is impossible that I can be mistaken," thought the bewildered commercial traveller, fidgetting in his chair; "and yet it is equally impossible that I can be right. *He* would never come into a public room in this manner—particularly so soon after the event Nevertheless, the likeness is striking! The same hair—the same high and open forehead—the same stature—the same well-proportioned form! Upon my soul it is very puzzling,—and very, very disagreeable."

Having reached this point in his reflections, he rang the bell violently and ordered his glass to be replenished. The waiter was evidently astonished at the excitement manifested in the summons, and begged submissively to know "whether the last tumbler was to Mr. Page's liking?" The reply was given in the affirmative; and the functionary departed with his feelings considerably relieved by the assurance—for he had begun to fancy that something had occurred to annoy one of his master's best customers.

On his return with the hot toddy, the waiter found Mr. Page gazing with painful earnestness upon the strange gentleman, who, still unconscious of the attention which his presence thus excited, was now listlessly sipping his rum-punch and looking up in a vacant manner at a picture of a sea-fight suspended between the windows.

"John," said the commercial traveller, in a low and scarcely audible tone, as he mysteriously beckoned the waiter close up to him;—then, casting a furtive glance towards the stranger, he demanded laconically, "Who is that gentleman?"

"I really don't know, sir," was the reply, also delivered in a whisper. "But master seemed to recognise him when he ordered his rum-punch at the bar."

"Then go and ask your master who he is, John," responded Mr. Page.

The waiter glided out of the room with the quick and noiseless step peculiar to his fraternity; and the commercial traveller said to himself, as he stirred his whiskey-toddy, "Now I shall have all my doubts cleared up—or my suspicions confirmed."

But Mr. Page was doomed to experience disappointment, and to be plunged back into the bewilderment from which he sought to emancipate himself: for the waiter returned, with a solemn countenance; and while affecting to be busily engaged in poking the fire,—as the stranger was now looking in that direction,—he said in a low and mysterious whisper, "Please, sir, master told me to mind my own business and not ask impertinent questions."

"Then it must be as I thought!" murmured Mr. Page; and he mechanically turned round to take another survey of the object of his attention, when he encountered the steady and almost haughty gaze of that gentleman's full blue eyes. The commercial traveller quailed beneath the look, in which there was something so confident, proud, and self-sufficient that all the man's doubts again sprung up in his mind, and with renewed force: for he thought

thin himself, "*That* is not the air of a guilty person!"

Still there was something strange and mysterious in the cold and haughty silence which the gentleman preserved: for the travellers' room at a commercial inn was a place whence frigid ceremony was banished, and where the formality of an introduction was not regarded as a necessary preliminary to conversation.

As these reflections passed through the mind of Mr. Page, he suddenly recollected that the stranger *had* made an observation when he first entered the apartment,—an observation, too, that was at least contemptuous, if not absolutely rude. "I should think not, indeed!" was the remark that had fallen from the gentleman's lips; and it was in reference to certain words which Page was uttering at the time.

The commercial traveller accordingly resolved upon making an attempt to draw the stranger into conversation; and, with a short prefatory cough, he said, "A very cold evening, sir."

"Very," was the laconic answer; and the gentleman moved half round in his seat—not absolutely turning his back upon Mr. Page, but just giving him so much of the cold shoulder as to intimate pretty plainly that he did not wish to enter into conversation with him.

The bag-man bit his lips then, suddenly mustering up all his courage, he rose from his chair—approached the table at which the gentleman was seated—and, looking him fully in the face, said, "I beg your pardon, sir—but have I not had the pleasure of seeing you before?"

"Nothing is more probable, sir," answered the gentleman, in a haughty tone, and with knitting brows: "but I should imagine that the mere fact of my presence here, would of itself indicate my desire to remain unnoticed and unrecognised."

"I should think so too," ejaculated Page, with an abruptness that perfectly astounded the gentleman. "The first moment you entered the room, a suspicion of who you were flashed to my mind—and now your own words have banished all my doubts."

The stranger had risen indignantly from his seat in the midst of these observations, to which he seemed prepared to give some cutting reply; but Page, having thus hastily blurted forth the words that came uppermost at the instant, rushed from the room.

"The unmannerly cur!—the rude boor!" exclaimed the gentleman aloud, while rage was depicted in every lineament of his flushed and heated countenance. "Fool that I was to come hither—and thus risk discovery!"

Then, without farther hesitation, he threw on his hat and cloak; and drawing up the collar of the latter so as to conceal his countenance as much as possible, he hastily quitted the apartment.

In the meantime Mr. Page had rushed, with frantic excitement, to the landlord, whom he chanced to find alone in the bar-parlour.

"Do you know whom you have in the house at this moment?" demanded the commercial traveller, panting for breath.

"Yes, sir—I do," was the cool reply: "but I also know that he does not wish to be recognised. For when he passed the bar, perceiving that I was aware of who he was, he made me a sign——"

"Perdition on the sign!" interrupted Mr. Page, angrily: "are you a man and a true Briton—and can you remain idly here, while such a person is beneath your roof?"

"If he chooses to come *incognito*," said the landlord, now growing irritated in his turn, "what business is it to you or me, I should like to know?"

"Business!—but there he goes, by heaven!" vociferated the excited commercial traveller, catching a glimpse through the bar-windows of the rapidly retreating form of the gentleman in his capacious cloak.

And in another minute Mr. Page was bounding after him.

But tripping over a mat in the passage, he fell heavily; and rising with difficulty—for he was seriously bruised in his officious haste to perform what he deemed to be a duty owing to society—he observed at a glance that the gentleman in the cloak had succeeded in effecting his escape from the house.

Scarcely, however, had he ascertained this fact when two stout, seedily-dressed men, each carrying a short thick ash-stick in his hand, entered the tavern; and as they crossed the threshold, one observed to the other, "We'd better not say at first that we're constables, Bill."

"Constables!—are you constables?" cried Page, darting forward, in spite of his bruises: then, without waiting for an answer, he exclaimed, "Because if you are, I can guess your errand and can give you some information."

"Well—don't speak so loud about it, sir, if you please," growled one of the men; "'cos vy, d'ye see, when once it gets known in a large place of this kind that there's peace-officers on the scent the individual wanted finds a many ways of escaping."

"Come along with me, my friends—one moment—and I shall be ready," said Page, sinking his voice to a whisper though speaking hurriedly; and he conducted them into the commercial room.

Having rung the bell and ordered his boots—for it will be remembered that he had betaken himself to the luxury of slippers on his arrival,—he observed in a hasty tone of interrogatory to the officers, "The Aylesbury business—eh?"

"Just so," was the equally laconic reply; and the man who gave it pulled out a printed paper offering *a hundred pounds' reward for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford.*

"One glance at it, if you please!" cried Page, snatching the bill out of his hand: then rapidly casting his eyes over the description given of the baronet's person, he continued, speaking in quick, jerking, and disjointed sentences,—"Ah! I thought I was right—I knew I couldn't be mistaken! Tall—well-formed—rather stout—walks very upright—imposing gait—commanding mien—dark auburn hair—handsome countenance—blue eyes—rather florid complexion—fine teeth. That's it—the baronet to a tittle! But here's the *Boots*."

With these words Mr. Page returned the bill to the constable and seized his boots from the hands of the hotel-functionary named; then, imperiously signalling that individual to leave the room, he hastily equipped himself for the purpose of accompanying the officers.

"If we happen to meet the landlord in the passage, my friends," he observed in a rapid tone, "we won't let him know who you are or what you

want: because I have seen enough to convince me that he is favourably inclined towards the baronet—and there's no saying how he may find means of sending him notice of what's going on, should we fail in capturing the villain to-night."

"All right," returned the officers: and away they went in company with Page, whose *sense of duty towards society* was wonderfully sharpened by the reward offered for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford.

Close by there was a hackney-coach stand: and the commercial traveller walked straight up to the waterman, and put a crown into his hand, saying, "My good fellow, a gentleman in a cloak took a vehicle here a few minutes ago—I am sure he did: now, where did he order the driver to take him?"

"All right, sir—Edgeware Road," replied the waterman, joyfully pocketting the welcome gift. "'Twas a yaller jarvey——"

"Look alive, then!" interrupted the active Mr. Page, as he sprang into a coach the door of which he hastily opened himself; and the constables having tumbled in after him, he exclaimed, "Edgeware Road—and a guinea for the jarvey if he catches up the other vehicle."

This exciting promise was instantaneously communicated to the driver by the waterman, who in equally succinct terms gave such information as enabled that functionary to comprehend which coach it was that was now to be pursued: and away went the equipage at a rattling pace.

"It wasn't a bad dodge of mine to commence inquiries at the coach-stand," observed Mr. Page to the constables, as they rolled along towards Oxford Street: "for may I be hanged if I knew what direction the fugitive took when he quitted the hotel."

"Oh! then he *was* at the George—eh?" exclaimed one of the constables; and turning to his comrade, he said, "So you see our information was right, Bill, arter all. But how was it, sir," he continued, again addressing himself to Page, "that you didn't collar him, if so be you twigged him there?"

"I can assure you that my palms itched to clutch him," replied the commercial traveller: "but I wasn't certain that he was really the man, and I was fearful of getting myself into a scrape by seizing the wrong one. Assault, battery, false imprisonment, defamation, and all that sort of thing, you know, kept rising up in my mind and restraining my arm."

"Lord bless ye, sir, if we was to be on'y half so particklar as that, we should never do no business," said the constable: "should us, Bill Sneesby?"

"You're about right, Mr. Grint," responded the individual thus blandly appealed to. "Our way is to knock folks down fust and take 'em up arterwards. If so be we've nailed the right uns, then there's no harm done: but if so be we've got the wrong sow by the ear, we apologises—and there's an end on't."

"And suppose that in this last case," observed Mr. Page, "the innocent persons whom you've treated so roughly, don't choose to be satisfied with an excuse?"

"Then we looks 'em up for interfering with us in the execution of our dooty," was Grint's prompt reply.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the commercial traveller, whose opinion of the morality of the two constables was not improved by this avowal: wishing, therefore, to change the conversation,—which we should observe, he had himself frequently interrupted by thrusting his head forth from the window to see if the yellow coach was in sight,—he said, "I suppose you are constables from Aylesbury?"

"Just so, sir," replied Grint: "and on coming up to town just now, we happened to meet a friend of our'n wot lives at Aylesbury and had been in London for the last week or so. Well, we got into talk together—and then we had summat to drink—and it was nat'ral enough that me and my partner here should tell him all about Sir Richard, 'cos he hadn't heard a word on it afore: as how should he? seeing that it on'y happened last night, and a matter of forty mile away from town. Well, sir, after he'd recovered his-self a bit—for he was struck quite stupid, as one may say—he says, says he, '*Mr. Grint, if ever I see Sir Richard Stamford in all my life, I saw him only a few minutes before I met you. He was in his cloak; and he turned into the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.*'—This was quite enough for Bill Sneesby and me; and it was fortunate we hadn't told our Aylesbury friend about the reward—or else he'd have wanted to go shares——"

"Here we are at the Edgeware Road!" suddenly cried Page: then thrusting his head out of the window, he exclaimed to the driver, "Push along, my man—don't spare your horse-flesh! Do you see anything of the yellow coach yet?"

"Nothing, sir," was the reply.

Page still kept his head out of the window: and he strained his eyes to the utmost as he looked up the road. The night was moon-lit, the atmosphere was of silvery clearness, and all was bright with the sheen of the frost—so that he could distinguish objects at a considerable distance.

Suddenly the coachman uttered an ejaculation, and at the same instant the commercial traveller caught sight of a vehicle a quarter of a mile a-head.

"That's it, sir!" exclaimed the driver. "There—it's crossing over from one side of the road to the t'other—most likely on account of the flint-stones——"

"I see—I see!" interrupted Page, who at that moment got a glimpse of the yellow side and wheels of the coach. "Push along, my fine fellow! You'll earn your guinea yet!"

"And us the hundred pound reward, sir," added Mr. Grint, in a tone of satisfaction as lively as it was in his stolid nature to render it.

"Why—they're a stopping, sir!" ejaculated the driver. "I s'pose they're a-waiting for us to come up with 'em——"

"No such thing!" cried Page, who was hanging half way out of the window, and straining his eyes to the full extent of their visual powers: "the villain has just jumped out of the coach——yes—'tis he, by heaven!"

"A tall man in a cloak, sir?" exclaimed the driver, without turning his head, but whipping his horses furiously.

"Yes—to be sure!" cried Page. "I saw him as plain as possible: he cut across the road——to those houses on the left there——"

"And now the yaller jarvey is turning round to come back again," said Mr. Grint, who was gazing from the other window.

This last piece of information was perfectly true; and in a couple of minutes the two vehicles met. The one containing the constables and Page pulled up—and the yellow coach followed the example. Out sprang the commercial traveller from the

former; and in breathless haste he assailed the driver of the latter with a host of questions.

"Which way is he gone?—where has he hidden himself?—what did he say?"

"Who dy'e mean?" demanded the coachman belonging to the yellow vehicle.

"Why—your fare, to be sure," answered Page: "the gentleman in the cloak!"

"Well—he didn't say much," was the response; "only when he happened to twig that you or some one with ye was hanging half-way out of that coach, he instantly called out to me to stop, tossed me a guinea, and cut off."

"But in which direction?" demanded the impatient commercial traveller.

"Ah! there you bother me," returned the man, evidently fencing with the question.

"You mean that he gave you a guinea not to answer any questions?" cried the astute Page. "Come—here are two; and now tell me the truth."

"Thank'ee kindly, sir," said the jarvey, leaning down from his box to receive the gold which Page handed up to him; then having clutched the reward he added, "But it's precious little information I can give you, sir. All I know is that when the gentleman jumped out of the coach, he cut across the road and was out of sight in a minute. Whether he turned down the lane there—or whether he went into one of the little gardens in front of the houses close by, I really can't say. But it must have been one or t'other—for he disappeared in a jiffy."

"And that's all you can tell me for the two guineas!" exclaimed the irritated commercial traveller.

"Every bit, sir," responded the man; and whipping his horses as he thus spoke, the yellow vehicle rolled rapidly away.

"Perdition!" cried Page: "he has fairly swindled me! But never mind—I shall not give up the chase—so follow me, my men, as quick as you choose."

And conceiving that it was not worth while to return into the vehicle in order to accomplish the little distance to the spot where the object of pursuit had descended from the yellow coach, the commercial traveller took to his heels—rushing along the road like a madman.

Grint and Snoesby, supposing that Page intended them to follow him likewise on foot, now leapt out of the vehicle: but the coachman, suddenly impressed with the idea that his fare were endeavouring to bilk him, bounded from the box, and laid a vigorous grasp upon the collars of the two constables.

An altercation now took place, which occupied ten minutes; for Mr. Snoesby looked to his principal, Mr. Grint, to emancipate him from any liability in the case—and, on his side, Mr. Grint was fearful that if he once paid the money, he should not be able to recover it again from Mr. Page. At length the two constables determined upon re-entering the vehicle and driving after the commercial traveller; and this plan was accordingly adopted.

In the meantime Mr. Page, having reached that part of the road where he fancied that the object of pursuit must have sought concealment somewhere or other, began to knock at every door in the row of houses with the gardens in front; but to his reiterated question whether a tall gentleman in a cloak had just taken refuge there, he was met by a decisive negative. At length, having thus disturbed the inmates of half a dozen dwellings—for it was now nearly eleven o'clock—he was on the point of giving up the pursuit in despair, when suddenly he recollected the lane to which the driver of the yellow coach had alluded.

"Well, I won't be beaten yet awhile," he murmured to himself: and away he sped along the lane, not pausing to reflect whether the constables were following him, nor whether, if he *did* succeed in overtaking the fugitive, he could possibly secure him without their assistance.

On therefore rushed Mr. Page, as if he himself were pursued by the officers of justice; and heaven knows how long he would have thus exercised his speed, had he not suddenly been stopped by a huge fellow, whom he encountered at a turning in the lane. The moonlight fell upon as villanous a physiognomy as ever one would expect to meet outside of Newgate; and the commercial traveller was by no way reassured when a more attentive examination of the man made him acquainted with the fact that he carried a great club-stick in his hand.

The result was inevitable, and just what our readers might suppose. Mr. Page was compelled to surrender his purse, his watch, and his gold ring upon the spot; and the robber, not satisfied with this booty insisted upon searching his victim's garments.

A mortal terror now came over the miserable commercial traveller; for all in an instant it flashed to his memory that he had about him his pocket-book containing bills of exchange and other documents of importance, which he had received during the last week of his tour, and which belonged to his employers, Messrs. Hodson and Morley of Wood Street.

"Come, now," exclaimed the ruffian, as Mr. Page exhibited an inclination to offer resistance to the attempt at personal search,—"none of your gammon with me; or I'll dash your brains out!"

And seizing the collar of the writhing victim with one hand, he brandished the club in a menacing manner with the other: so that Mr. Page was forced to surrender at discretion. The pocket-book was accordingly discovered by the thief in the course of a few moments; and when he had hastily glanced on its contents by the moonlight, he said in an abrupt tone of interrogation, "Bills of exchange—eh?"

"Y-e-s," replied the miserable Page, who was shivering from head to foot, alike through cold and terror.

"Well—they're of more use to you than they are to me," continued the robber; "and so you may have the book back again for fifty guineas."

"Fifty guineas!" repeated the unhappy commercial traveller. "I hav'n't got a farthing left about me. You have taken my purse, which contains ten or a dozen guineas——"

"A miserable trifle!" exclaimed the robber. "Is it worth your while to give fifty guineas to have the pocket-book back, with all its contents, just as they are?"

"Worth my while!" cried Page, a gleam of hope breaking in upon him even through the black cloud of his present misfortune: "to be sure it is. I should be ruined—utterly ruined—if I didn't recover it."

"Well, then," said the man, "I'll tell you how we can manage the affair. To-morrow night at nine o'clock precisely, you must be walking about at the beginning of Tooley Street—just over London Bridge.

you know;—and there you'll meet a young woman dressed in black. She wont speak to you first: but you must go up to her and ask whether she's waiting for any body. She'll reply that she has found something and is looking for the owner. Then you may tell her that you're the person she's expecting; and when you put fifty guineas into her hand—mind, fifty golden shiners, and no flimsies—she'll give you up your pocket-book.

"Can't it be done before to-morrow night?" demanded Page, who was most anxious to call upon his employers in the morning.

"No:—you must bide *my* time," was the rough and decisive answer. "And now let me give you a little bit of advice—which is, not to try any plant upon the young woman, or get constables to lurk about for the purpose of grabbing her: because she'll have friends watching at no great distance—and as certain as she is to be rescued, so sure are you to have a bullet through your head. Do you understand me?"

"It would be difficult to mistake your meaning," responded Page.

"So much the better," observed the robber. "And now I shall say 'good night.' But I may as well give you a little bit of information, though, before we part," he added, as an idea struck him. "The fact is, my dear sir," he continued, assuming a familiar tone, "I'm a very useful man in my way, and not particular to a point or two. I'm pretty well-known to a good many swell fish coves at the West End—although they don't recognise me if we happen to meet in Bond Street. Our intimacy is all private, and only lasts while I've any business in hand for them. But what I was going to observe is, that if you ever get into any trouble and want a clever chap to get you out of it—or if you may happen to require anything of a delicate nature to be done neat and clean—you may apply to me. There's a flash crib in Horsleydown, known as the *Beggar's Staff;* and a message left at the bar for Joe the Magsman will in due course be delivered to *me*. So now good night!"

Having thus delivered himself, the huge ruffian turned and proceeded at a rapid rate down the lane—flourishing his club in a manner indicating as significantly as possible that it would be dangerous to follow him.

But Mr. Page had not the least idea of making the attempt. Indeed, he was so astounded by the strange tirade with which the thief closed the interview that he could not reply, even if he had wished, to the parting salutation.

At length, recalling his scattered ideas, he began to deplore most bitterly the wild-goose chase which he had that night undertaken and which had brought him into his present unenviable predicament; and then he bethought himself of the two constables whom he had left in the hackney-coach.

"The lazy scoundrels!" he ejaculated aloud: "if they had only followed me as I enjoined them, this misfortune could not have occurred. On the contrary, we might have captured the thief who has plundered me. By heaven, 'tis provoking—very provoking! Purse, watch, ring—all gone; and fifty guineas to pay to-morrow night for the pocket-book."

While thus giving way to his vexation, Mr. Page rapidly retraced his steps; and in a short time he reached the main road, where he vainly looked about for the hackney-coach. The driver had become tired of waiting; and the constables were accordingly compelled to undertake the settlement of the fare—in pursuance of which agreement, the vehicle carried them back to Holborn.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the commercial traveller,—exhausted with fatigue, half dead with cold, and bitterly repenting of his folly in meddling with matters that did not immediately concern him,—reached the George and Blue Boar where he lost no time in seeking the repose of which he stood so much in need.

But even this he was not permitted to enjoy so long as he could have wished: for scarcely had the thousand churches of the mighty metropolis proclaimed the hour of seven, when he was aroused by a violent shaking through the medium of a rough hand applied to the shoulder;—and, starting up, he beheld, by the dim light of the cold wintry morning, the forms of Grint and Sneesby by his bed-side.

These worthies came to dun him for the hackney-coach fare which they had been forced to make up between them;—and the wretched man was compelled to borrow the money of the landlord to satisfy their rapacity.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEAUTIFUL SISTERS.

We must now return to the gentleman in the cloak who was the object of the wild-goose chase which terminated in so deplorable a manner for Mr. Page.

The reader will remember that there was a row of houses with gardens in front of them, at that part of the Edgeware Road where the fugitive had suddenly and unaccountably disappeared. These dwellings were small, but neat externally and comfortable within; and they were dignified with the name of "Villas." The speculator who had built them, inherited from his father the not very euphonious name of Gubbins; and, though his ambition prompted him to bestow immortality on the appellation by calling the range of houses "Gubbins' Terrace," his friends had wisely interfered to rescue the "sweet little cottages" from such an ugly nomenclature. The result was that the title of "Paradise Villas" was fixed upon as a more pleasing substitute, and was conferred accordingly.

The villa that stood last in the row and at the angle of the lane in which Mr. Page was eased of his property, was occupied by a widower and his two daughters. Mr. Clarendon was a gentleman of small—very small income, allowed by a wealthy and titled relative. He had been unfortunate—some said improvident—in early life, and had married the beautiful but penniless daughter of a poor clergyman. This match gave great umbrage to the proud and aristocratic family to which he himself belonged; and when his own means were exhausted, all that he could obtain from the bounty of his cousin, Lord Marchmont, was an allowance of a hundred and fifty pounds a-year, just to keep him from actual penury.

Mrs. Clarendon was a woman of fine feeling, generous sympathies, and keen sensibility: and her husband's misfortunes preyed deeply upon her mind. She secretly reproached herself with being the cause of the disgrace into which he had fallen in respect

to his family; and, taking the matter to heart, literally pined away until she sank into the tomb. Mr. Clarendon now found himself left, at the age of five-and-thirty, with two young children totally dependent upon his care; and he resolved to perform his duty towards his motherless daughters. His family still persisted in disowning him; and he accordingly retired into some remote and cheap district, where he reared and educated the girls to the best of his means. They grew up in all the glory of maiden loveliness: but being deprived of the more delicate supervision of a mother, and having scarcely any female society in the seclusion which their father's slender resources compelled him to adopt, their minds were not imbued with those strictly feminine principles which the maternal parent can alone inculcate, foster, and permanently establish. Their virtue wanted the stamina necessary to maintain it when it should have to pass through the world's ordeal: it was rather of a negative quality than otherwise—existing because it had as yet undergone no temptation. Their religion was confined to a mere knowledge of the sacred writings, read and remembered like any other book, and believed in because they had been taught to hold that faith:—but the deep conviction—the holy reliance—and the profound feeling, which constitute true religion, were deficient. They went to church with regularity, as many other giddy and thoughtless young ladies go: but they never had had any one to impress upon them the necessity of laying aside all worldly thoughts, and throwing the whole soul into the divine worship. Good-natured, affectionate, and light-hearted girls were Octavia and Pauline Clarendon: artless, frank, and innocent likewise were they, because totally ignorant of the world's ways, and inexperienced in its snares, its perfidies, and its deceits.

When their education was completed, Mr. Clarendon, who had long been wearied of the dull seclusion in which he thus passed so many years, removed with his two daughters to London; and in

one of the Paradise Villas had they been located about eighteen months at the time when our tale opens.

But Mr. Clarendon was not now at home. Years had elapsed since he had made any effort to be reconciled to his proud relations; and, at last—finding that his income was disproportionately small when compared with the claims that there were upon his means, especially with an augmenting taxation and the increasing dearness of provisions—he had resolved to repair to Marchmont Castle in Derbyshire, and endeavour to seek an interview with his noble cousin, its owner. Considering that his daughters had reached that age when they could take care of themselves during his temporary absence, Mr. Clarendon set out accordingly; and only two days had elapsed since his departure, when the incidents which occupied our two first chapters took place.

Before, however, we resume the thread of our narrative, we must pause for a few moments to describe Octavia and Pauline Clarendon.

They were both tall, elegantly shaped, and possessing a maturity of charms which made them seem two or three years older than they really were: for at this time, Octavia was twenty-one, and Pauline a month or two past nineteen. Their style of loveliness was pretty nearly the same,—except that Octavia's hair was a rich auburn, and her sister's a dark brown: but their complexions were equally fair and beautiful—without spot or blemish, and reminding the beholder of the most delicate blending of the hues of the rose with the purity of the lily. Their foreheads were high and open,—their mouths small, and with lips red and ripe as cherries—and their teeth of pearly whiteness. Their eyes were of deep blue—large and rolling, and at times expressing an involuntary tenderness that gave a voluptuous langour to the countenances of these charming sisters.

Octavia and Pauline were tall in stature, as we have already observed: but we might have stated that they were above the usual height of women. Indeed, they were fine-grown girls—and not merely beautiful but handsome. Whom to prefer of the two, on the score of loveliness, it would have been difficult to decide: for if there were something more subdued and retiring in the blushing charms of Pauline,—yet it was impossible to gaze without the tenderest emotions on the more imposing and queenly beauty of Octavia,—especially when the light, playing upon the rich redundancy of her auburn hair, seemed to crown its glossy surface as with a glory!

And Octavia knew that she was beautiful: her gait—her demeanour—her carriage, all denoted a consciousness that she was the object of admiration. Nor less was Pauline gifted with the same vanity;—but it displayed itself less—or rather, was more subdued by the bashfulness attendant on a tenderer age.

The sisters were much attached to each other, and loved their father with the sincerest affection. Though a disappointed—crushed—and dispirited man, he had behaved kindly towards them; and they fully comprehended all the sacrifices he had made to rear them genteelly. They accordingly repaid him with the most solicitous attention to all his wants and wishes; and we must mention, as a good trait in their character, that they never sought to gratify their vanity by extravagance in dress. They moreover devoted so much care to the domestic affairs, and managed with so much economy, that no regular servant was kept: the occasional attendance of a char-woman was all that was needed to assist them in maintaining the little dwelling in the best possible order.

We have enabled our readers to form a tolerably correct idea of the two young ladies who are destined to play no inconsiderable part in our narrative, of which we now resume the continuous thread.

It was verging towards eleven o'clock on the evening of Mr. Page's adventures, when a tradesman from the neighbourhood knocked at the door of the cottage inhabited by the Clarendon family; and Octavia answered the summons. The man left some article which had been ordered, and, having apologised for calling so late, took his departure. The young lady then tripped lightly down the gravel-walk of the little garden in order to lock the front gate; and at that instant a gentleman in a cloak, who had just alighted from a hackney-coach precisely opposite, hurried up to Miss Clarendon, saying, "Permit me to step in and rest myself for a few minutes."

Had she paused for a single instant to reflect upon this request, she would have at once seen that it was of so extraordinary a nature, coming as it did from a perfect stranger and at such a time of night, that nothing but a prompt refusal could consistently and properly meet it:—but its very strangeness, and the abruptness with which it was made, so completely confused—or rather bewildered the young lady, that she held the gate open with her fair hand,—and the gentleman, taking this as a proof of assent, hurried into the house.

Scarcely, however, had he thus glided past Octavia, when she was struck with the impropriety of which she had been guilty, and hastened after him. On entering the villa she mechanically closed the front door behind her; and as all this was the work of a few moments, the driver of the yellow coach did not in reality perceive which way the gentleman had so suddenly disappeared.

Pauline was seated in the little front parlour, which was very neatly furnished, and lighted with a lamp; and the supper, consisting of a cold joint, was upon the table. The young lady was both astonished and alarmed when she heard the heavy steps of a man rush into the house; and she started from her chair, with an ejaculation of terror.

The stranger entered the parlour and seemed immediately struck with the exquisite beauty of Pauline Clarendon; and he had scarcely given utterance to a few words of apology for his abrupt intrusion, when Octavia made her appearance.

If the gentleman in the cloak had been seized with admiration of the younger sister, he was now positively amazed at the queen-like loveliness of the elder: but almost instantly perceiving the awkward position in which he stood with regard to these young ladies, and the embarrassment which they experienced at this adventure, he hastened to give some explanation which might relieve them from so unpleasant a feeling.

"I am well aware, charming ladies," he said, in a smooth and courteous tone and with a fascination of manner which almost immediately disarmed them of any resentment which his intrusion had excited,—"I am well aware that my conduct must appear most rude—most ungentlemanly—most unjustifiable in

your eyes: but I trust that you will give me leave to rest myself for a few minutes—and in the meantime I shall be enabled, I hope, to satisfy you that I am incapable of offering you a wanton insult."

While he was uttering the last words of his speech, Octavia exchanged with her sister a hasty glance which showed that the same thought had simultaneously struck them both: namely, that it would be impossible to refuse the slight hospitality which was solicited.

The elder Miss Clarendon accordingly sate down—an example which Pauline immediately followed; and the gentleman, understanding the tacit assent thus conveyed, threw off his cloak and took a chair. The brief pause afforded by these little arrangements gave him an opportunity of thinking of some excuse that might account for his extraordinary intrusion and enlist the sympathies of the young ladies at the same time: for he was suddenly seized with the desire to cultivate the acquaintance of the two most charming creatures he had ever encountered in the course of his life.

On their side, they could not help observing that their strange visitor was not only of very handsome appearance, but likewise of polished manners; and that there was about him an air of refinement far superior to anything they had before met with in their short experience of the world. In fact, the sisters were both prepossessed in his favour; and when he resumed the conversation, they were fully prepared—though involuntarily—to accept any reasonable excuse which he might offer for his conduct.

"Feeling that the most ample explanation is due to you, ladies," he said, "I must begin by stating that I am a gentleman of some property, and that my name is Harley. It may be that I was foolishly good-natured—it may also be that I was deceived by a villain: but certain it is that I gave my security to a large amount on behalf of a person who called himself my friend—and this individual has absconded. Young ladies of your age, and dwelling in a genteel seclusion—if I may be allowed to form an opinion of your habits from the favourable impression you have made upon me—are not likely to be well acquainted with the proceedings of that dreadful pestilence called *law*: but you may probably have heard or read enough to understand that a person in my position becomes liable to have his freedom most disgracefully molested by certain human sharks known as *bailiffs*. Such is my present state; and it was in flying from those malignant enemies that I was audacious enough to seek refuge in the first house whose friendly door stood open."

This statement was delivered in a tone of semi-jocularity which put the young ladies into a very good humour with Mr. Harley; and another interchange of glances convinced each sister that they were both animated with the same inclination to render all possible service to a gentleman who had suffered so cruelly in aiding a friend. Octavia accordingly expressed the pleasure which they felt in being able to afford him a refuge; and concluded a few brief and modestly delivered observations by offering him some refreshment—at the same time apologising for the frugal nature of their fare.

Mr. Harley, who as a man of the world saw that the acceptance of the proposal would naturally place him upon a more friendly footing with the sisters, responded in the affirmative; and now, while Octavia hastened to arrange a knife and fork and clean plate for the guest, Pauline tripped lightly down into the kitchen, returning presently with a jug of foaming table-ale which she placed on the board. Mr. Harley apologised for giving so much trouble; whereupon Octavia informed him, with a modest dignity truly captivating, that they were accustomed to wait upon themselves, as their circumstances did not permit them to keep a servant—and they could therefore well attend upon their guests. This avowal was turned to advantage by Mr. Harley, who paid the sisters a flattering but delicate compliment upon the praiseworthy qualities which were thus revealed to him; and he dexterously suffered them to understand that he himself was a stranger to the happiness of a sweet domesticity, being as yet unmarried.

As the conversation progressed, he learnt that the sisters were alone together in the house, and that their father had gone into Derbyshire. They also, in the artlessness of their character, made him acquainted with the reasons of this visit and the hopes that were entertained of their parent being able to effect a reconciliation with his noble relative Mr. Harley expressed an earnest desire that the journey might be crowned with success; and in all he said there was an apparent sincerity which still further increased the favourable opinion already formed of him by his beautiful hostesses.

Indeed, an hour had passed away so pleasantly that the young ladies had not once thought of the lapse of time, until the clock in the passage proclaimed midnight; and then, suddenly made aware how late it was, they glanced somewhat uneasily at each other. Mr. Harley rose immediately from his seat, and resuming his cloak, was about to express his gratitude for the hospitality he had received, when a sudden crash in the road, just opposite the house, and which was instantaneously followed by the plunging of horses, the screams of ladies, and the ejaculations of post-boys, startled the inmates of the comfortable little parlour.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCOUCHEMENT.

The sounds which thus appeared to promise a new adventure, were occasioned by the sudden breaking of the fore-axle of a travelling barouche, which was whirling along the road as speedily as four spanking horses and two expert postillions could hurry it.

Mr. Harley instantly rushed forth to offer his assistance to the ladies whose screams had emanated from the vehicle; while Octavia and Pauline followed as far as the garden-gate to render their aid if necessary.

The scene in the road was one of the utmost confusion and terror:—for the postillions were occupied in endeavouring to quiet their horses, which were plunging frightfully;—a valet in plain clothes had been thrown from the box, and pitching on his head, lay stunned within a few feet of the broken vehicle;—a lady's-maid, who was seated on the same dangerous eminence, was clinging to the rails which she had clutched just in time to save herself from a similar accident;—and two ladies inside were shrieking for help.

Mr. Harley's first impulse was to drag the valet

away from the dangerous vicinity of the horses' hoofs; and a rapid glance by the aid of the pure moonlight enabled him to perceive that the man was not killed, and was indeed already regaining his senses. Mr. Harley then assisted the lady's-maid, who was half dead with terror, to descend from her critical position on the box;—and, having thus ensured her safety, he opened the door of the barouche to afford egress to the two ladies.

All this had been the work of less than half a minute; but scarcely had Mr. Harley obtained a glimpse of the countenance of the lady who was farthest from the side of the vehicle where he stood, when he uttered an ejaculation of amazement, and, darting away behind the barouche, disappeared in a few moments.

The ladies themselves were too much terrified to notice his features when he had approached the door to open it; and now, hastily precipitating themselves from the interior, they were received in the arms of Octavia and Pauline. For the sisters, perceiving the sudden flight of Mr. Harley, sprang forward to succour those whom he had thus unaccountably abandoned.

One of the ladies was apparently about eighteen or nineteen; the other was upwards of ten years older;—and it was the *former* whose countenance had produced so strange an effect upon Mr. Harley.

The sisters instantaneously conducted these two ladies into their parlour; and the younger one, sinking upon a chair, moaned and writhed as if in great pain. The elder lady appeared to be seized with a sudden consternation at beholding these symptoms on the part of her companion: but almost immediately recovering her presence of mind, she turned towards the sisters, exclaiming in a tone of hurried though fervent appeal, "For the love of God, young ladies, assist my suffering friend to a bed-room—she is about to become a mother!"

This intelligence, startling though it were, was sufficient to excite all the generous sympathies that dwelt in the bosoms of the sisters: and they hastened to comply with the urgent request, while the elder lady rushed back into the road to give certain instructions to the postilions and the servants.

By this time the valet had recovered his senses and was slowly approaching the house, leaning on the arm of the lady's-maid, who, as we have already intimated, was more frightened than hurt.

The elder lady's orders were rapidly and imperiously given.

"Matilda," she said, addressing herself to the female, "hasten to rejoin your mistress, *who is seriously indisposed*:" and as she uttered these words, she darted upon the abigail a glance of deep meaning, which the clear moonlight prevented from being either lost upon her or misunderstood. Matilda accordingly hurried into the house.

"Pembroke," said the lady, now speaking with equal rapidity to the valet, "you must get those postilions away and all traces of the accident removed as speedily as possible. Reward the men liberally—and see that the occurrence is kept as quiet as it may be. Having done this, you must take a lodging for yourself in the neighbourhood; and let me know your address—by *letter*, mind—in the course of to-morrow, so that I may be enabled to convey farther instructions to you. You can direct to me in the name of—let me see?—oh! Mrs. Smith; and a glance will inform you presently the number of this house and the name of the Place or Terrace, or Row, where it is situated."

The valet received these instructions with a low bow; and the lady whom we shall now denominate *Mrs. Smith*—that being the nomenclature which had first suggested itself to her mind—hurried back into the villa.

Ascending to the bed-room whither her younger companion had been borne, she exclaimed, upon entering the chamber, "How does my dear *Mrs. Mordaunt* feel now?"

These words were uttered with a rapid and expressive glance at the lady's-maid, as much as to convey an intimation of the name by which the invalid was to pass; and the sisters were too much bewildered by this new adventure that had occurred, to notice anything extraordinary in the way in which the question was put.

The invalid herself—whom we must call Mrs. Mordaunt—was in the incipient agonies of a premature childbirth, and too wretched in mind as well as too much anguished in body to notice anything that was passing around her. Mrs. Smith now implored Octavia to procure the immediate attendance of a medical man; and the young lady, throwing on her bonnet and shawl, hastened to comply with the request. Pauline quitted the chamber at the same time, and repaired to the parlour, where she awaited the return of her sister, who shortly re-appeared, followed by a surgeon from the neighbourhood.

The medical gentleman thus summoned, was about forty years of age, and tolerably handsome. His features were large and regular; but his countenance could not altogether be styled pleasing, inasmuch as there was a sinister expression in the eyes which, though scarcely definite enough to strike a superficial observer, would not have escaped any one of keener perception. It happened that he had only just returned home from the house of a patient when Miss Clarendon called; and he was accordingly dressed in his usual manner, which was with considerable neatness and precision, when he accompanied her to the villa. He was a person of few words, and never asked questions through motives of curiosity: so long as he was well paid, he saw things only with a professional eye;—but he was avaricious, selfish, and of a money-making disposition. He was married to a lady who shared in his miserly propensities; and as they had no children and his practice was extensive, they had contrived to amass a handsome independence.

Mr. Thurston—for this was the name of the medical gentleman—was introduced into the bed-chamber where his services were required; and Octavia, having seen him as far as the door of that room, returned to her sister in the parlour.

"This is a night of adventures, Pauline," she observed, as she seated herself near the cheerful fire and warmed her hands which were chilled with the nipping frost.

"But the present incident is more extraordinary and also more unpleasant, than the former," returned the younger Miss Clarendon. "By the bye, did you notice how abruptly Mr. Harley took his departure?"

"I consider his behaviour to be most rude—most ungentlemanlike," said Octavia, with a strong emphasis on the epithets. "After the hospitality we afforded him—and under such equivocal cir-

circumstances, too—the least he could have done would——"

"Would have been to wish us good bye," observed Pauline, finishing the sentence for her sister;—and the two handsome girls pouted their pretty lips,—lips on which an Anthony might have sealed the loss of the empire of a world!

"But do not let us think of Mr. Harley any longer," suddenly exclaimed Octavia, proposing however something to which she could not possibly settle her mind, inasmuch as the handsome person, the elegant manners, and the varied conversational powers of that gentleman had made a deep impression upon her.

"No—we will banish him from our memories," observed Pauline. "Indeed, we ought to think of the poor lady up-stairs, whom the accident to the barouche will perhaps render prematurely a mother."

"And she is of course totally unprepared for such an event," said Octavia. "I will steal gently up to the room—knock at the door—and inquire if we can possibly be of any service ——"

"Do so, dear sister," interrupted Pauline: "for I can assure you that Mrs. Mordaunt's beautiful countenance, though convulsed as it was with suffering, completely prepossessed me in her favour These ladies are evidently rich:—did you observe what magnificent furs they wore—and what costly jewellery they had about their persons?"

"Yes—they are both handsomely dressed, and very superior in their manners," said Octavia. "They moreover travelled in good style—a barouche and four, with a valet and a lady's-maid: and yet they could not be going to a great distance—for they do not appear to have had any boxes or portmanteaus with them."

"The same circumstance struck me just now," remarked Pauline. "In my opinion they are people of rank travelling *incognito*. Such things are done, you know, dear sister. At all events, the barouche was a plain one—without any arms upon the panels ——"

"And the valet was not in livery," added Octavia. "But while we are wasting time by chatting in this manner, as if nothing unusual were going on in the house, the poor lady may require our services in some way or other."

Scarcely were these words uttered when the door opened and Mrs. Smith made her appearance.

"My dear young ladies," she said, "I know not how to thank you sufficiently for your kindness towards my bosom-friend Mrs. Mordaunt. I feel deeply all the generosity of your conduct; and—pardon me for making such an observation—but rest assured that it shall not go unrewarded."

"Oh! madam," ejaculated Octavia, the blood rushing to her cheeks: "though we are poor, we are not mercenary ——"

"I know it, my sweet girl," interrupted Mrs. Smith, in a kind and conciliatory tone: "nevertheless there are means of proving one's gratitude in a substantial manner, and yet so delicately as to give no offence. However—we will not say any more upon that subject at present: for I have yet another favour to solicit ——"

"Speak, madam—speak," cried Octavia: "anything that we can do to serve yourself or your friend shall be done cheerfully."

"My request is that you will show our female attendant Matilda the way to the surgeon's house," answered the lady. "Mr. Thurston himself—for such I understand to be his name—is unable to quit his patient up-stairs; and he has written a short note which must be immediately forwarded to his wife, in order to procure certain little articles absolutely necessary under present circumstances. But as Matilda is quite ignorant of this neighbourhood—and as we cannot think of suffering you to go out any more *alone* at so late an hour ——"

"I am ready, madam," exclaimed the good-natured Octavia, hastily resuming her bonnet and thick shawl, which she had laid aside in the parlour on her return from the previous visit to the surgeon's.

The lady's-maid was thereupon summoned; and Octavia, once again daring the piercing chill of the night, conducted the dependant to Mr. Thurston's residence. Mrs. Thurston was in bed; but a servant speedily answered the door, and admitting Miss Clarendon and Matilda into a parlour, took the note up-stairs to her mistress.

We should here observe that the surgeon and his wife were in the habit of receiving at their house ladies who were in a way to become mothers, and who had special reasons for retiring into a strict seclusion during the period of their confinement. A good supply of baby-linen was therefore constantly kept ready by the thrifty and money-making Mrs. Thurston; and it was for articles of this kind that Matilda had been sent with the note. The surgeon's wife, presuming from the nature of her husband's note that he had in hand a case that was likely to prove lucrative, manifested no displeasure at being summoned from her warm couch, but rose immediately and packed up a quantity of baby-linen in the course of a very few minutes. The servant delivered the parcel to Matilda, who, thus provided, returned with Octavia to the villa.

The lady's-maid was a shrewd, cautious, and reserved young woman, of about five-and-twenty. She was tolerably good-looking, well educated, and of superior manners for her position: in fact, she was the daughter of a poor curate in some remote district, and who having a large family to support upon ninety pounds a-year, while his rector had five thousand, was compelled to allow his eldest children to accept menial places in wealthy families.

During the walk to and from the surgeon's house, but a very few words were exchanged between Miss Clarendon and Matilda; and those were confined to observations of no particular interest.

We must now introduce the reader to the chamber where Mrs. Mordaunt was lying in the pangs of maternity, with the surgeon on one side of the bed and Mrs. Smith on the other.

The young lady who was thus about to become a mother, was, as we have already stated, about eighteen or nineteen years of age. She was tall and well formed,—with a full and rounded bust, voluptuously developed,—a remarkably clear and beautiful complexion,—large blue eyes, with dark fringes and brows delicately pencilled,—lips that were the least thing coarse, but between which gleamed rows of pearl,—and a nose and chin that were exquisitely chiselled in the purest classic style. Her luxuriant light brown hair now flowed in rich, curled, and wavy masses all over the pillow, and wantoned upon the bosom that was palpitating with the throes of both bodily and mental agony.

Mrs. Smith was likewise a handsome woman, of a style of beauty contrasting altogether with that which we have just described: for her hair and eyes were black—her complexion was of that clear olive, or

rather bistre, which shows in its pure transparency the carnation hue of the warm blood,—and her shape was slender, but admirably proportioned.

The surgeon had not been many moments in the chamber, ere his quick eye perceived that Mrs. Smith wore a wedding-ring; whereas the lady who was called Mrs. Mordaunt and who was about to become a mother, had upon her finger no such evidence of the marriage state. Mr. Thurston did not however appear to notice this fact: he saw, by the well-filled purse which peeped half-way out of a reticule that had been tossed on a chair, and by the handsome jewellery belonging to the ladies, that his bill was safe,—and that was sufficient.

After an absence of about twenty minutes, Matilda returned with the baby-linen; and her arrival at this instant was most opportune—for shortly afterwards Mrs. Mordaunt became the mother of a male child.

CHAPTER V.

MORNING IN LONDON.—THE DISOWNED BABE.

Cold, gloomy, and cheerless dawned the wintry morning, like a grey mist that struggles with slow and partial success against night's darker veil.

The frost had broken up suddenly, and was succeeded by a dampness of the atmosphere that hung like a thick and noxious vapour over the mighty metropolis.

The water-cress girl, shivering in her scant clothing and with her naked feet and ankles of a livid red as if they were raw, could scarcely give forth the usual cry that proclaimed her presence, so spasmodically did her teeth chatter; and as the poor wretch dragged her weary form along, gazing anxiously at the house-doors to see whether the servants were coming out to buy, each bleeding foot left its sanguine trace on the pavement. Alas! unhappy creature—she had risen at five, and for three long hours that morning had she groped in the utter darkness and amidst the ponds and rivulets in the northern outskirts, for a few pennyworths of green sprigs that were to give a relish to breakfasts eaten in warm rooms and by cheerful fires! But not a morsel of bread had as yet passed *her* lips—and her hands and her feet were so numbed that they had lost all sense of feeling as she trod the damp pavement or doled forth her cresses.

Soon after this poor girl had passed along her usual beat, came the milk-maid with cheeks as red as if she were a forest-hoyden, and with her buxom charms denoting by their round, plump, and swelling contours, the enjoyment of a vigorous health. She was warmly clad with a thick shawl over her shoulders, and good stockings, and lace-up leathern boots; and though she felt the cold, yet 'twas not with that shivering wretchedness and shuddering sensation of misery which convulsed the frame of the other. There was moreover a certain cheerful assurance in her strange and fantastic cry; and at each house where she stopped, she had a pleasant remark to make and a kind greeting to receive.

Ten minutes afterwards, the baker came shuffling along, with his basket slung to his back and containing the hot rolls enveloped in a blanket; while at the same time the bell of the muffin-boy thrilled through the damp and heavy air.

At this hour, too, might be seen the servant-maids sweeping out the dust at the front doors or scouring the steps,—then pausing to nod to some acquaintance in the shape of a tradesman's assistant, passing by,—or perhaps tripping down to the iron railings before the houses, just to exchange a few words of friendly gossip with each other.

Behold, likewise, the old char-women bustling along to the places where they work,—drawing their thin, scanty shawls as closely around their shivering forms as possible—gazing wistfully at the public-house as they pass it, and thinking how agreeable a dram would prove on such a miserable morning—and conning over the last bit of scandal which they have gleaned, in order to retail it anon with all the amplifications their ingenuity can devise.

Perhaps, too, at this hour, may be met two or three of the daughters of crime,—miserable specimens of the frail sisterhood, returning home to their wretched abodes after having passed the night in some house of infamy—with their finery all huddled on in a manner indicating that the care which presided over the toilette ere they sallied forth on the previous evening, has not been observed in the hurried make-shift of the morning,—lost, degraded, health-shattered creatures, with the natural pallor or sallowness of their features fearfully visible even beneath the warm artificial complexion which rouge has given to them!

Yes—and at that period of general rising and breakfasting throughout all save the strictly fashionable quarters of the metropolis, the half-naked, shivering, squalid mendicant may be seen crawling, or perhaps shuffling along,—with his shirtless breast all exposed to the bitter air—his hair damp, as if he had slept in a field or wandered all night about the streets—his shoulders thrown forward, and his lank arms drawn in tight against his sides, while one hand is clasped over the back of the other in the spasmodic convulsion of a chill that searches him through and through to the very marrow of his bones!

Nor less, at this same hour, soon after the dawn of the miserable winter's morning, is seen the starveling beggar-boy,—a lad of tender years, whose growth is stunted by misery, and whose frame is emaciated so that the ribs in his poor little sides may be counted,—the friendless, parentless, and unprotected child, who seems to be the outcast of society—a filthy globule of the moral scum thrown up by the fermenting passions, interests, and selfishness of the great world of London,—a miserable being whose existence is passed in the very gutter, or on the dunghill, or under hedges, and who is not even so enviable as those whose lot alternates between a flash-house and a prison,—a poor doomed boy to whose ear it were a hideous mockery to breathe a word of religion, or of morality, or of the hopes and fears attendant on the Christian faith!

Yes: cold, gloomy, and cheerless dawned the wintry morning, as the beautiful sisters, Octavia and Pauline Clarendon, began to make preparations for breakfast. They had scarcely closed their eyes all night: but their cheeks glowed with the hues of health, and their spirits were gay and cheerful as they performed those domestic duties which they chose not to entrust to the char-woman, who had already arrived.

As Mrs. Mordaunt progressed well after her accouchement, Mr. Thurston had returned home at about two o'clock in the morning; and during his absence an earnest and most serious consultation had been held by the young mother and her friend Mrs. Smith, relative to the disposal of the babe. At length they resolved that certain proposals should be made to the surgeon; and accordingly, when he reappeared shortly after eight o'clock, Mrs. Smith sought an opportunity of speaking with him alone in a room adjoining the chamber of the invalid.

"Mr. Thurston," she said, "I wish to submit to your consideration a matter of vital importance—and yet I know not how to open the subject."

"Perhaps, madam," returned the medical man, "it will save you some embarrassment if I assure you that I have already formed a conjecture relative to the aim which you have in view."

"Indeed, sir!" ejaculated the lady, amazed at his keenness of perception. "You can guess, then that——"

"That it is respecting the child," he added, fixing his dark eyes significantly upon her. "Be not afraid madam, to explain your views: I am a man of honour!"

"Then I can no longer hesitate to address you upon this delicate—*most* delicate subject," resumed Mrs. Smith, encouraged by the surgeon's words. "You doubtless observed that there was no wedding-ring upon the hand of my unhappy friend—and I need scarcely tell you that she has become a mother without being a wife! Oh! sir—the honour of an illustrious family is menaced — terribly menaced——"

"There are ways and means of covering female frailty with an impenetrable veil," interrupted the surgeon, in an emphatic tone.

"Ah! now I am still farther encouraged to proceed," exclaimed the lady; then, after a short pause she said, "Will you take charge of that hapless babe, Mr. Thurston?—your recompense shall far exceed your most sanguine expectations."

"I will, madam," was the answer, instantaneously and unhesitatingly given. "But as this must be regarded as a mere matter of business—a negotiation to be conducted with the utmost circumspection and prudence—pardon me if I inquire what guarantee you can offer me for the fulfilment of any conditions that may be settled between us?"

"Listen attentively, sir," replied Mrs. Smith; "and ponder well upon all I am about to say. Upon receiving into your house that hapless child whom a mother's frailty compels her to disown, you must consider that it henceforth belongs to you. Adopt it as your own son if you please—or bestow upon it any name you may think fit,—and devise any tale which may appear to you most suitable to account to your friends for the fact of its being thrown upon your hands,—arrange all these details in your own way,—but pledge yourself solemnly and sacredly never to take any steps to discover its parents. On these conditions the sum of ten thousand pounds——"

"Ten thousand pounds!" ejaculated Thurston, startled from his habitual equanimity and self-possession by the mention of such a princely amount, and half-fearful lest his ears should have deceived him.

"Yes — ten, thousand pounds," repeated Mrs. Smith. "Will that sum suffice?"

"I accept the proposal, with all the conditions you may annex to it," said Mr. Thurston, recovering his outward composure, although his heart was elate with an indescribable joy.

"You will undertake, then, to preserve an inviolable secrecy regarding what little you already know or what more you may suspect in reference to the mother of that child," resumed Mrs. Smith: "I mean that should you meet her hereafter, you will not attempt to recognise her, wherever that encounter may take place and under whatever circumstances."

"I assent to all this," said the surgeon; "and I swear most solemnly to observe the compact."

"The same condition which I last stipulated, applies to myself," continued Mrs. Smith. "Wherever and whenever you may happen to meet me, we must be strangers—total strangers to each other."

"All shall be as you propose, madam," returned Mr. Thurston. 'Have you any farther instructions?"

"None, replied the lady. This evening the money shall be paid to you—and at any risk to herself I must remove my unhappy friend to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed the surgeon. "Consider, madam—the weather is inclement—it is in the depth of winter——"

"But the case is urgent, sir," interrupted Mrs. Smith, in a tone which cut short all farther remonstrance on the part of the medical man.

Thus terminated the colloquy; and when they retraced their way to the bed-chamber, Mrs. Mordaunt instantaneously perceived by her friend's countenance that she had effected an arrangement with the surgeon.

After breakfast Mrs. Smith obtained writing-materials from the sisters and immediately penned the following letter:—

"——— was prematurely delivered of a male child last night. The infant lives, and is pronounced by the medical man to be healthy. Arrangements have been made in a satisfactory way relative to the disposal of the babe. Circumstances, which I cannot possibly pause to detail, favoured the secrecy of all that has occurred; and ——— is as well and in as good spirits as can be expected. I will write again in a day or two. We shall remove to-morrow to my seat in Herts.

"E. D."

This letter was addressed to *General Barth, Post-office, Weymouth;* and, having carefully folded and sealed it, Mrs. Smith took it herself to a receiving-house in Oxford Street. Thence she proceeded in a hackney-coach to a banker's at the West End; and having there obtained a large sum of money, she visited a jeweller's shop at which she purchased two handsome lady's watches and several other articles for the embellishment of the female toilette, the total cost amounting to about a hundred guineas.

Mrs. Smith then returned to Paradise Villas, and presented the jewellery to Octavia and Pauline. The young ladies, though much delighted with the gifts, which were at once tasteful, elegant, and handsome, at first objected to receive them on the ground that it appeared as if any little service which they had rendered might appear mercenary: but Mrs. Smith succeeded in over-ruling their scruples, by assuring them that the "trifles" she proffered were merely to be regarded as proofs of a sincere friendship.

This matter being arranged, Mrs. Smith hinted in a delicate way that, for certain reasons which she considered it unnecessary to explain, it would be

better to keep the incidents of the past night as secret as possible; and the sisters readily promised to obey this injunction, observing however that they could not do otherwise than inform their father on his return of what had occurred. But they assured Mrs. Smith that he was by no means likely either to find fault with them for receiving the ladies into the house, nor to mention the circumstances elsewhere.

These precautions being adopted, Mrs. Smith sent as soon as it was dusk for Mr. Thurston, who arrived shortly afterwards. She then paid him the stipulated sum of ten thousand pounds; and the moment had now arrived for Mrs. Mordaunt to part with her child. The scene was a painful one: for although that infant was the living evidence of the young mother's frailty and the proof of her dishonour, yet did she already experience a parent's love for the innocent babe; and, contemplating it with mournful and passionate affection, her countenance was for a few instants animated with the blushful glow of strange inward exultation.

But, alas! she was compelled to resign the hapless babe to the care of strangers,—to separate from it —disowning it at once and for ever! The sacrifice was torturing to her soul: but there was no alternative—no choice;—and when the child was gently taken from her by Mrs. Smith, the wretched parent covered her face with her fair white hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

In a few minutes the unconscious cause of all this mental suffering was carefully enveloped in thick shawls: and Matilda, bearing it in her arms, accompanied the surgeon to his own abode. On her return she was enabled to give the young mother the consolatory assurance that Mrs. Thurston had already provided a wet-nurse for the infant, and that every preparation had been made to give a suitable reception to the little stranger.

On the following morning, while it was yet dusk, a plain travelling-carriage drove up to the door; and Mrs. Mordaunt, well wrapped up to guard her as much as possible against cold, was conveyed into the vehicle. Mrs. Smith followed her—Matilda took her place on the box by the side of the valet Pembroke, who was in attendance—and the equipage drove rapidly away in a northern direction.

We should observe that the two ladies had not forgotten to express their gratitude to the sisters for the hospitality which they had experienced at the villa: and Mrs. Smith promised to call upon them as early as circumstances would permit.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. PAGE AND MR. HODSON.—THE BOW STREET OFFICER.

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we left at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn, just after he had been aroused from his slumbers by the addle-pated constables from Aylesbury.

Having hastily dressed himself, the commercial traveller descended in no very pleasant humour to the public room, where he ordered breakfast; and as he happened to be the only person there at the time, he was thrown entirely on the companionship of his own reflections.

These were far from being of an agreeable nature. Indeed, Mr. Page was placed in a cruel embarrassment from which he knew not precisely how to extricate himself: for it was certain that his employers, Messrs. Hodson and Morley of Wood Street, would hear of his arrival in London—and they would think it very strange if he did not call upon them without delay. But how was he to make his appearance at their counting-house, and not offer to place in their hands the bills of exchange which he had received from their provincial correspondents? He dared not confess that he had been robbed of those documents: for even if Hodson and Morley did not suspect his honesty, they would be sure to blame his carelessness—and his discharge from their employment must inevitably follow.

What was he to do? He was more than half inclined to keep away from Wood Street until the morrow, hoping in the mean time to recover his pocket-book; for it must be observed that he possessed a friend from whom he well knew he could borrow the fifty guineas requisite to redeem it, and he felt assured that the robber would keep to his agreement, the bills of exchange being of no possible value to him.

On the other hand, if he *did* delay his visit to the warehouse of Messrs. Hodson and Morley, he was certain to be questioned upon the subject; and a plea of temporary indisposition was not likely to avail him with gentlemen of such business-habits as his employers.

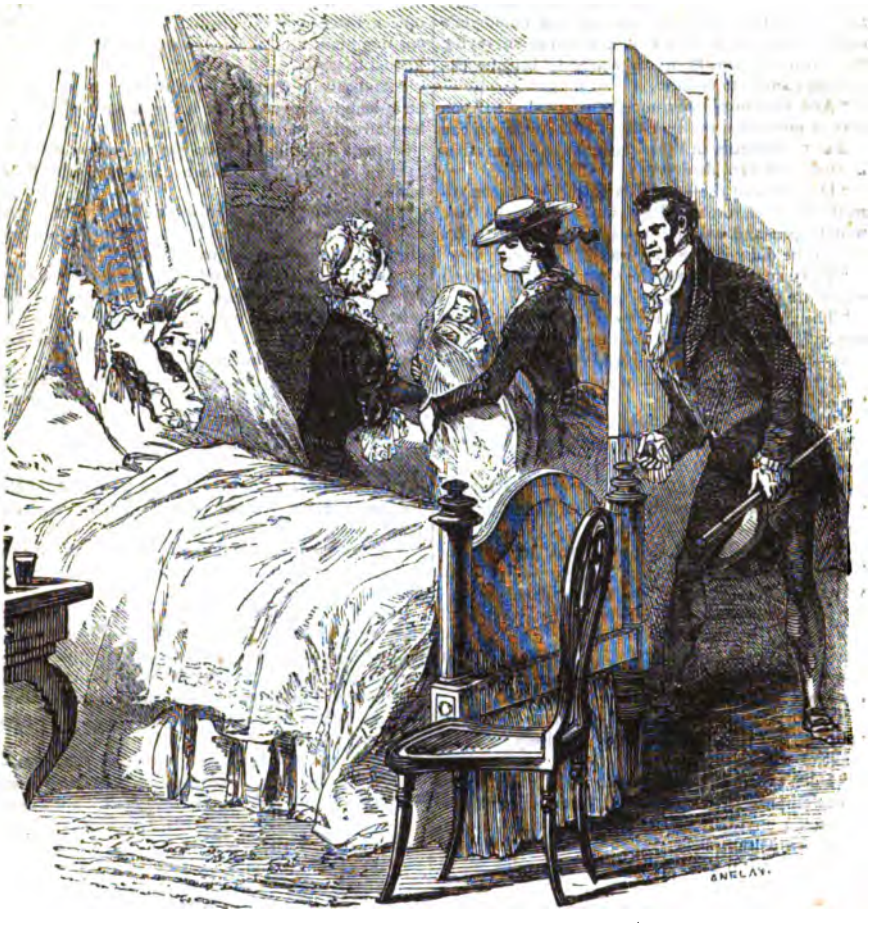
In a state of complete bewilderment did Mr. Page sit down to his breakfast. He inwardly cursed Sir Richard Stamford—the Aylesbury constables—the reward offered for the apprehension of the baronet—and the disagreeable individual whom he had encountered in the lane, and who delighted in the appellation of Joe the Magsman. Then having thus profusely distributed his maledictions, Mr. Page concluded by d——g his own folly, and invoking sundry imprecations on his own eyes and limbs.

He was in one of those humours when nothing seems good to the appetite or satisfactory to the mind. He denounced the coffee as ditch-water—the bacon as musty—the eggs as tasting of straw—and the butter as train-oil; and he was just inflicting a sassarara upon the waiter for not keeping up a cheerful fire, when the door opened, and, to the ineffable dismay of the commercial traveller, Mr. Hodson entered the room.

The senior partner in one of the largest commercial firms in Wood Street, was a man of about fifty years of age, and was dressed in the fashion of what was the "old school" at that period. He wore powder and a pig-tail, a square cut coat, knee-breeches and gaiters, and a waistcoat with large flaps over the hips: a massive gold chain with a number of seals depended to his fob; and he carried a gold-headed cane in his hand. In person he was short and stout: his countenance, though with the roundness and redness usually indicative of good humour, was somewhat stern in expression; and his look was cold, business-like, and even suspicious.

Such was the individual who now made his unwelcome appearance in the coffee-room; and the moment his eyes lighted upon Mr. Page, they remarked the confusion which suddenly seized upon that individual.

Affecting, however, not to notice the unaccountable dismay which his presence thus caused, and



which the commercial traveller almost instantaneously endeavoured to veil beneath a forced composure, Mr. Hodson approached the table, and took a seat, observing, "How do you do, Mr. Page? I felt assured, from your last letter, that you would arrive in town yesterday evening; and as I was passing this way, I thought I might as well give you a call."

"Thank you, sir—I am really much obliged to you for this kindness, sir—very much obliged, sir," stammered the commercial traveller. "How is Mr. Morley, sir?"

"He is quite well," responded Mr. Hodson: "that is to say, well in health, Mr. Page—but in regard to spirits, I cannot give an equally satisfactory account."

"Indeed, sir?" exclaimed Page, interrogatively.

"The fact is," continued Mr. Hodson, "Berkeley and Trent have stopped payment—and the result is that our house experiences a very heavy loss."

"Berkeley and Trent of Friday Street, sir!" cried the commercial traveller. "I thought they stood *A* 1 in the trade?"

"And so did we," observed Hodson. "The contrary, however, has been made sadly apparent; and this very day have we two of their bills thrown back on our hands."

"I—am extremely sorry to—to hear it sir," faltered Page, now feeling convinced that his employers would require the documents contained in the pocket-book. "I hope that the loss does not put you to any serious inconvenience, sir?" he added.

"Why—I think we can get over it," answered Mr. Hodson, his countenance now relaxing into a species of grim smile: for the man was worth thousands, and could have stood up against the bankruptcies of a dozen correspondents or agents. "But we require at once all the securities we can get together, to pay into our bankers'; and as I am going direct to them, I thought I might as well look in and obtain from

you the bills which you received at Aylesbury and elsewhere, and of which you duly advised us."

Mr. Page poured the milk into the sugar-basin instead of his tea-cup, in the confusion which attended his endeavour to look unabashed; and then raising his eyes furtively towards his employer's countenance, he beheld that gentleman surveying him with an intensity which suddenly became exceeding painful to endure.

"And therefore," continued the merchant, "you may at once hand me over those bills; and you can call at your leisure in Wood Street to settle the other matters with Mr. Morley."

"Do you want the—the bills at once—I mean directly, sir?" stammered Page, wishing that the floor would open and swallow up either himself or his master, he did not care which at the moment.

"To be sure I do," was the answer, delivered with a mixture of indignation and amazement.

"Then, sir—I must throw myself upon your mercy," returned Page, a cold tremor coming over him,—"for I shall not be able to give them to you until to-morrow morning—or perhaps to-night at ten o'clock."

"The devil you must!—and why not?" ejaculated Mr. Hodson. "Come, sir—speak out at once! I see that there is some mystery in all this."

"There is indeed, sir," cried Page; "and I hope you will not be angry with me. But the truth is I was robbed——"

"Robbed!" repeated the merchant, now eyeing his traveller with unmistakable suspicion. "Then, why did you not tell the truth at once?"

"Because I was afraid of your being angry, sir," was the answer: "and I have every expectation of recovering the bills this night. The thief agreed to deliver them up on receiving fifty guineas: and he has made an appointment with me to that effect."

"And you will of course give him into custody?" said Mr. Hodson, not knowing precisely what to make of this story

"I don't dare do it, sir!" exclaimed Page, with a strong emphasis. "The villain assured me that if I attempted anything of the kind, I should have a bullet through my head. Besides, he is not to come himself, but will send a young woman dressed in black."

"Justice cannot be thus cheated of its due, Mr. Page," observed the merchant, in a severe tone. "Granting all you have told me to be strictly true, there is a certain line of conduct to be adopted in this case, and which our duty to society renders imperative. Put on your hat, sir—and come with me."

The wretched commercial traveller dared not offer any objection to this command; and he accordingly followed Mr. Hodson, who strode out of the hotel with all the purse-proud pompousness of his nature. The way that he took was the most direct to Bow Street; and on arriving there, he requested an audience of Mr. Peter Grumley, who was one of the officers attached to the police-court and the most famous thief-taker of the day.

Being shown into a private room, Mr. Hodson and the commercial traveller were speedily waited upon by a middle-aged man, six feet in height, of large proportions, and evidently endowed with a herculean amount of strength. He was attired in a shabby style: but this was from habitual neglect, and not from necessity, as his calling was a most lucrative one. In his hand he carried a substantial stick or rather bludgeon; and his coat-pockets stuck out suspiciously as if they contained pistols.

This was Mr. Peter Grumley; and to him did the merchant unfold the purport of his visit. The officer listened with great attention—never once opening his lips until Mr. Hodson had concluded all he had to say.

"And this is the genelman which was robbed?" he at length observed, jerking the thumb of his left hand over his shoulder towards Mr. Page, who was standing a little in his rear: for the officer was sitting in a lounging manner upon the edge of a table.

"Yes—this is my commercial traveller," answered the merchant; "and he will give you any additional information you may require."

"Good and well," said Grumley, laconically "Was you a-coming home in your vehicle?" he demanded, now turning round and taking a calm but lengthened survey of Mr. Page, who felt very uncomfortable indeed under the scrutiny.

"No—not exactly," was the reply. "I—I was on foot at the time. In fact, it was after I had put up my horse and shay at the George and Blue Boar."

"Well—and where did the robbery take place?" asked Grumley.

"In a dark and narrow lane leading out of the Edgeware Road—about a mile up, on the left hand."

"And what were you doing in such an out-of-the-way quarter with my property in your possession?" demanded Mr. Hodson, angrily.

Page saw that it was useless to attempt any further concealment of the real truth—especially as disagreeable suspicions might fall upon himself. He accordingly related, without more hesitation, all the particulars of his adventures on the preceding evening; and when he had told his story, he felt relieved of a heavy load.

"So it was the Magsman which stopped you—eh?" observed Mr. Grumley, in a musing tone "You see it's all right and straightfor'ard enow, sir,' he continued, turning towards Mr. Hodson; "and your traveller really has been robbed. I don't think he's told no lies about it," added the officer, expressing the opinion with as much coolness as if it were a high compliment paid to Mr. Page's honesty.

"What can be done in the case?" inquired the merchant.

"We must see," was the vague and general answer. "I've long been on the look-out for Joe the Magsman: but he's the cunningest dog in all London, as well as one of the most desperatest. As for the young woman he talks of sending to manage this business to-night, she's his mistress. The *Gallows' Widow* they call her, because her husband was hanged a couple of years or so back: and she's worn weeds ever since—not on account of any particklar love she had for him, but because black clothes makes one look more respectable and is a better dodge to carry on business in her line. It would be a blessed thing to break up the whole gang—for there's a lot on 'em as is in league with the landlord of the Beggar's Staff."

"I am sure that Mr. Page will render you all the assistance in his power," observed Mr. Hodson; "and in that case I can promise, both for 'self and partner, that his harum-scarum imprudence of last night shall be overlooked. It is a duty we owe to society, to

lend a helping hand in exterminating such dreadful miscreants as these of whom you have been speaking."

"Well—if so be Mr. Page has pluck enough to enter into the business, we can manage it, I've no doubt," said Grumley, swinging one of his legs backward and forward, and surveying the movement with infinite complacency. "Be you agreeable, sir?" he asked, suddenly raising his head and fixing his small grey eyes inquiringly on the commercial traveller.

"Certainly he is," hastily exclaimed the merchant, without allowing the principal party concerned to speak for himself. "Are you not, Mr. Page?"

"Oh! decidedly, sir," responded this individual, summoning to his aid as much courage as he could command: although, in the secret recesses of his soul, he did not at all admire the prospect of placing himself in collision with Joe the Magsman and the Gallows' Widow.

"There's a hundred pound reward offered for the apprehension of the Magsman," observed Mr. Grumley, deliberately unrolling a bundle of bills printed in ominously large type, and displaying the one which related to a certain Joseph Warren. "A hundred pound to be got," he repeated; "and therefore me and Mr. Page will go sheers."

"That's business-like!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, his countenance brightening up at the prospect of a recompense for the risk he was about to encounter.

"Well, then," resumed Mr. Grumley, "you must keep the appintment punctual this evening; and when you meet the Gallows' Widow, you must tell her that you want to see Joe the Magsman about some partickler business, and that you're going on as far as the Beggar's Staff in Horslydown. If so be the Magsman is in the neighbourhood at the time, watching your interview with his woman, she'll most likely take you to him. If not, she'll say that you can go with her to the flash boosing-ken But in any case you *must* go on to the Beggar's Staff; and then leave all the rest to me."

"Am I to go alone?" inquired Page, with some degree of surprise and dissatisfaction at the arrangements proposed.

"To be sure!" answered the officer. "Why—what a fool's trick it would be to make your appearance with a troop of constables at your back. The rascals would take the alarm, and in a few minutes they'd be no-where. Don't be afraid, sir: assistance will be pretty nigh, I can tell you."

"Very good," remarked Page. "And supposing that I am introduced into the presence of this Magsman, as he calls himself—what excuse had I better make for wanting to see him?"

"Why, you'll tell him that you're in the employ of a very rich firm in the city, and that having made a mull of your accounts, you're grown desperate and don't mind helping to rob 'em," said the officer. "The Magsman will snap at the bait; and so, if we don't succeed in grabbing him to-night, we shall be preparing a plant to catch him in Wood Street But you must mind and do it properly—or else the whole thing 'll fail, and he 'll grow cunninger than ever."

"I understand," observed Page; "and you may depend upon it that when I *do* enter into a thing, it is with a determination to go on boldly."

"So much the better," exclaimed Grumley. "And now, genelmen, as my time is precious and I've got certain little arrangements to make for to-night, I'll say good bye for the present."

Mr. Hodson slipped a few guineas into the officer's hand; and then took his departure, accompanied by Page.

CHAPTER VII.

EVENING IN LONDON.—THE GALLOWS' WIDOW.

It was nine o'clock in the evening; and a misty rain was falling.

The lamps shone dimly as if through a fog: the streets were covered with a slimy mud;—and Father Thames rolled through the arches of London bridge with a moaning sound.

The wayfarers in the streets hurried along in a manner which showed that they would not be abroad unless business or necessity compelled them: those who had umbrellas were a trifle less sullen in looks than those who had none;—and these latter appeared as miserable as scanty clothing, inclement weather and the jostling of crowds on the filthy slippery pavement could possibly render them.

Young seamstresses taking home the work which they had toiled hard to accomplish by a certain time,—milliner-girls returning to their poor lodgings,—women of pleasure in their flaunting garbs, contrasting so strangely with the aspect of the evening,—poor men's wives going to purchase the frugal supper at some cheap shop—and old crones shuffling along to the public-house,—these were all mingled pell-mell in the myriad thoroughfares of the mighty metropolis—and the eye of the acute observer might single out each and assign her to the particular class to which she belonged.

Of the male sex there were the ill-paid and half-starved clerk—the artizan, wearied with his hard day's labour—the needy adventurer in his shabby-genteel suit—the small tradesman, running about to collect in a few debts for the purpose of meeting a payment on the morrow—the old libertine whom no weather could keep out of the streets when the frail sisterhood walked abroad—the young rake puffing his cigar and nodding familiarly to the loose females whom he passed—the drunkard reeling home from the tavern—and the shivering beggar gazing wistfully at the windows of the bakers' shops and the eating-houses.

Then, too, might be observed the pauper-woman with an infant in her arms and a little family of shoeless and stockingless children trooping along miserably behind her;—here a ballad-singer, standing in the gutter, had collected a small knot of idlers;—and there a costermonger was pushing along his barrow, reckless of whose shins he might bruise or break at the crossings.

Amidst the people thus passing to and fro in all directions might be observed the juvenile pickpocket, with rapid walk as if intent upon gaining some particular destination, although in reality having no settled point in view; while the older thief sauntered more leisurely along, with his hands in his own pockets as if he had not the slightest intention of dipping them into the pockets of others.

The shop-windows were all rendered dim by the rain that settled upon them: the coloured waters in the chemists' dispensaries reflected a sinister light upon the countenances of the passers-by;—and the

chains, watches, and ear-rings in the jewellers' windows shone only like tarnished gold.

While the wealthy and the well-off were seated at home, in their warm rooms and by their cheerful fires, how many thousands of houseless wretches were wandering about the wet streets—or crowding in gateways—or lying crouched up on the door-steps! In the mansions of the great there were luxuriously spread tables, the delicious viands being served up on silver, and the generous wines sparkling through crystal;—and at the same time, and in the same city, children were crying for food in cold, damp, and wretched garrets. While the merchant sate down to his supper, rejoicing in the day's gains which amounted to hundreds, the hard-working man was devouring a sorry crust, the thought that he had no employment for the morrow imparting bitterness to the sorry meal!

But let us return to our narrative.

It was, as we have observed, nine o'clock in the evening when Mr. Page, enveloped in a cloak, and with a thick shawl-kerchief tied round his neck, reached that point whence Tooley Street branched off from the foot of Old London Bridge.

Being very cold, he entered a public-house to take a dram at the bar; and while drinking the same, his eyes happened to light upon the countenance of Mr. Grumley, who was seated in a corner smoking a pipe in a manner so free and easy, that no one unacquainted with him could possibly have suspected that he had any important business in hand.

Giving a slight and rapid sign of intelligence to Page, the officer raised a pewter-pot to his lips, and indulged in a long draught of porter; and the commercial traveller, understanding that the Bow Street functionary did not wish to be spoken to or in any way recognised, paid for his dram, and quitted the house.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold, when he observed a female attired in deep black within a few yards of him; and as she passed, she stared at him in a peculiar manner. The light of the tavern-lamp, dim though it were, gave him a good view of her countenance, which, in spite of its paleness, retained the traces of great beauty. She was of middle height—thin, but not badly shaped;—and when she had ceased to gaze so intently upon the commercial traveller, she suddenly assumed a demeanour so retiring and modest that a stranger would have taken her for the wife of a small tradesman or respectable mechanic.

Page felt convinced that this was the woman whom he had to meet; and he was hesitating whether to follow her or not, when she turned back; and as she repassed him, she again regarded him with a peculiar significancy.

"One moment, young woman," said Page, touching her upon the shoulder as she was walking rapidly on. "Are you looking for any one?"

"I have found something and am in search of the owner," she replied, in a voice that was far from disagreeable, her lips at the same time revealing a very good set of teeth.

"Then I am the person you want," returned the commercial traveller; "and I have got fifty guineas to pay you."

"Who told you to meet me here, sir?" asked the woman, examining him attentively.

"A person called Joe the Magsman," was the immediate response.

"Good!" remarked the Gallows' Widow. "Follow me."

And thus speaking, she led the way into a narrow court forming the side entrance to a pawnbroker's shop: then, stopping short under a lamp over the door of that establishment, she said, "Give me the money,"—at the same time producing the much coveted pocket-book.

Page handed her a small canvass bag containing the gold: but before she parted with his property, she drew out a quantity of the money, examined the pieces with a keen though rapid glance, and having thus satisfied herself that they were genuine, gave him his pocket-book.

"You may open it, sir," she remarked; "and everything will be found quite safe. The bills were of no use to us."

The commercial traveller hastily inspected the documents; and perceiving that the woman had spoken the truth, he secured the pocket-book about his person. The Gallows' Widow was then about to take her departure; but Page stopped her, saying, "I want very much to see your friend the Magsman as early as convenient. Indeed, I did think of pushing my way as far as the Beggar's Staff this evening."

The female darted upon him a look of suspicion; but the commercial traveller kept his countenance admirably—and he saw *her* features gradually relapse into an expression of confidence.

"Well," she said, after a brief pause, "I am going that way—and so you can accompany me if you choose."

"Willingly," answered Page.

And away they went together.

Plunging now into the vile, filthy, and dangerous district on the southern bank of the Thames,—a neighbourhood which was lighted only by the shop-windows and not by street-lamps,—and unable to see his way clearly enough to avoid the pools of water and the heaps of mud which abounded in that locality,—the commercial traveller walked by his companion's side, at first in profound silence In fact, he had quite enough to do in endeavouring to pick his path: for at one moment he stumbled over a stone—at another he trod upon a dead dog,—then he slipped into a hole, spattering himself even to the very countenance with slime—and next he was wading through a pile of filth accumulated at some corner. The farther he went, the darker became the neighbourhood; for the inhabitants were shutting up their shops and the sky was so densely covered with clouds that not a glimpse of moonlight nor a single star relieved the obscurity of the scene.

Having proceeded some distance along Tooley Street, the Gallows' Widow turned up Mill Lane, Page still keeping by her side; and breaking the long silence which had prevailed, he observed, "This is a frightful neighbourhood."

"I dare say—to those who are not accustomed to it," replied the woman.

"But you seem to walk easily and comfortably enough without splashing yourself," said the commercial traveller.

"I know every inch of the way," was the answer.

Page wished that he did;—but as such was not the case, he was compelled to make the best of it.

"Where are we going now?" he demanded, as his guide took a turning to the right.

"Along Pickled Herring Street," she responded.

In this throughfare the houses were all shut up; and it was only when a light gleamed from some window, that Page could catch a glimpse of the principal features of the path which he was pursuing. That the Thames was close by, he however knew, alike from his general acquaintance with London, and from the low moaning of the vast volume of water as it rolled onward in its mighty bed;—and then it struck him how easy it would be for evil-intentioned persons to assail, rob, and murder the defenceless individual in that lonely district, and dispose of the corpse in the river that was so near at hand.. Shuddering at this idea, he looked back to ascertain if any one resembling a constable was following: but the darkness was so intense that he could distinguish nothing even at a distance of three or four yards.

At length the young woman stopped at the corner of Horslydown, which is a street branching off to the right; and, hastily seizing the arm of her companion, she drew him into a deep door-way, saying, "We will remain here a few minutes, if you please."

"But for what purpose?" asked Page, astonished at the movement.

"Hush!" whispered the Gallows' Widow.

A profound silence now reigned, disturbed only by the gurgling of the adjacent waters as they broke against the piles of a wharf: but in a short time footsteps were heard approaching, and the woman again caught the commercial traveller by the arm to retain him in the door-way and impress upon him the necessity of keeping silence. Almost immediately afterwards, the form of a man passed the place where they were concealed: and it was easy to judge by his footsteps that he turned the corner into Horslydown.

"We must remain a few minutes longer, if you please, sir," said the woman, in a whisper so low that had Page been a foot farther off he could not have distinguished the words that were thus uttered.

In a very short time another man passed the door-way, and likewise turned into Horslydown; and when the echoes of his steps had died away, the Gallows' Widow again requested her companion to stay a little longer in that recess.

It now struck Page that the two men whom he had seen pass that way, were not altogether unconnected with the present adventure: in fact, he felt assured that they were constables on the watch. But almost simultaneously with this idea, the suspicion flashed to his mind that the Gallows' Widow might be waiting in that dark concealment to ascertain if her footsteps were dogged; and a cold trembling came over him as he contemplated the perils which he was encountering—the desperate character of the man whom he sought to deliver into the hands of justice—and the horrible neighbourhood in which he was pursuing this dangerous course.

"What are you waiting for?" he suddenly demanded of his companion in a whisper

"Hush!—more footsteps are approaching," was the prompt reply, also delivered in a tone barely audible.

"But I do not choose——" began Page, his terror gaining upon him.

"Silence—or I will blow your brains out!" was the low, but hasty and emphatic rejoinder: and at the same time the commercial traveller felt the cold muzzle of a pistol touch his cheek.

An appalling consternation seized upon him; and had he not been leaning against the wall in the deep door-way, he would have fallen to the ground. Another man passed along the street, and turned into Horslydown.

"We will remain a little longer," said the woman. "But if you dare move or make a noise, I shall instantly suspect some treachery—and I will put a bullet into you with as little ceremony as if you was a mad dog that had bit me."

As she spoke, she withdrew the pistol from its alarming contact with the commercial traveller's face: but at the same instant its ominous click fell upon his ears, as if to warn him that the Gallows' Widow did not waste her words in idle threats.

He was horror-struck at the ferocious character which the woman had thus displayed so suddenly Her pale, pensive, and even mild countenance appeared totally incompatible with such a daring and desperate spirit;—and her manner was so reserved and subdued that it seemed impossible for her disposition to arouse itself to such a terrible energy.

While Page was making these reflections, which stole upon him in spite of the alarm that he now experienced, nearly ten minutes had elapsed; and during that interval not another soul had passed along the street.

"We will go now," said the Gallows' Widow at last.

They accordingly emerged from their place of concealment, and turned into Horslydown.

Page was more than half-inclined to give his companion the slip and rush away as quickly as his legs might carry him: for he did not at all admire the circumstances which had just occurred. But no sooner had the thought of escape risen up in his mind, when innumerable reasons suggested themselves against it. He dreaded the wrath of Mr. Hodson—he feared to lose his employment in that individual's service—he longed to gain a share of the reward for capturing Joe the Magsman—and he trembled lest his formidable female companion should send a bullet whizzing after him, were he to raise her suspicions by attempting to decamp.

But he was still balancing which course to pursue, when the woman suddenly observed, "Here we are;" —and as she pushed Page gently on in front, he mustered up all his courage and entered the notorious boosing-ken.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEGGAR'S STAFF.

In a long, low, and ill-lighted room, a number of men and women were seated at tables, some of them engaged in eating their suppers, and all having drinking materials before them.

Though the weather was so cold without, an intense heat pervaded this place: for at one end was a fire which blazed from an enormous kitchen-grate half-way up the wide-mouthed chimney. The cloud of tobacco-smoke which spread like a haze throughout the apartment, and appeared to hang like a mass of dingy drapery to the ceiling, augmented this heat, and produced a stifling sensation in Page's throat. The vapour appeared to be of a darker hue in com-

sequence of the blackness of the ceiling and the walls, which were seen dimly through it; while the floor was so begrimed with dirt that it seemed as if the cleansing effect of water was unknown at the Beggar's Staff.

On the side of the room nearest to the street there was a long and very narrow window, covered with a blind of baize which once was green, but had completely faded into a dirty brown. On the opposite side was a semicircular counter, or bar, behind which an open door afforded a glimpse of a little den, denominated "the parlour."

Within the bar stood a fat, burly, red-faced man, with a dirty cotton nightcap upon his head and a short pipe in his mouth. Having thrown off his coat in consequence of the heat, he was now in his shirt-sleeves; and his linen was certainly the foulest ever thus displayed. His countenance was sinister and forbidding; and his bloated appearance indicated that he was no indifferent admirer of his own liquors.

This individual, we need scarcely observe, was the landlord of the Beggar's Staff; and though his name was in reality Stephen Price, as proved by the inscription on the sign in front of the house, his customers invariably denominated him *the Big Beggarman*.

He was assisted in his occupation at the bar by his daughter—a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, and whose forbidding features contrasted strangely in their vixenish sharpness with the coarse and bloated countenance of her sire. She was dressed in a very slovenly manner: her flaming red hair was in such disorder that it looked for all the world as if she had been creeping through a bush;—and her face and hands appeared to have had a desperate quarrel with soap and cut it accordingly. Her gown was open in front, displaying her scraggy neck and chest—for she was as flat in respect to bosom as one of the opposite sex. Her Christian name was properly Mary: but the *sobriquet* by which she was commonly known, was either *Carrotty Poll*, or plain *Carrots*.

The wall behind the bar was arranged with shelves, whereon stood a variety of drinking vessels, bottles of ardent spirits, jars of tobacco, and plates and dishes—these last being for the accommodation of those customers who cooked their own meals at the huge fire blazing in the grate. Within the bar, and raised upon trassels of rough-hewn timber, were two vast barrels—one of porter, the other of ale: for the apparatus whereby malt liquor could be drawn from the cellar into the bar, was not as yet invented.

Over the little door which has already been mentioned as leading into the *parlour*, was painted—or rather scrawled with a paint-brush, the ensuing droggrel:—

All them as comes to ask for beer,
Must tip the ready rhino here:
For pipes and bakker please to pay
Afore you takes the things away;—
For bingo and blue ruin too
Naught but the stumpy down will do:
Short reckoning makes long-standing friends—
While tick in strife and trouble ends.
And when you go, I hope you'll not
Walk off with glass or powter pot.

The rules and recommendations laid down in this precious composition would not have appeared unnecessary or misplaced in the eyes of any one who studied the aspect of the company present: for a more villanous and repulsive assembly of human beings it would be difficult to conceive.

Rascality and dissipation characterised the countenances of the men—profligacy and debauchery marked those of the women. Many, of both sexes, were in rags: others were more comfortably attired;—and a few were flashly dressed. But the unmistakable stamp of inveterate vice and loathsome immorality was upon them all; and if any doubt as to their principles had existed in the mind of a person entering upon that scene for the first time, the conversation which was going on would have cleared up all uncertainty in a very few moments.

The women positively appeared anxious to outvie the men in the horrible nature of their oaths, the disgusting obscenity of their jests, and the coarse frankness with which they glorified in their profligacy. Some of the younger females assumed the most lascivious attitudes, in order to wheedle the men out of their money or induce them to expend it profusely; and here and there might be seen half-drunken thieves and burglars rendered maudlin by ardent spirits, sitting with these wanton girls upon their knees and with their hands in their bosoms.

When Page first entered the room, preceding the Gallows' Widow in the manner already described, he could scarcely distinguish any object through the dense cloud of tobacco smoke: but in a very few moments the persons present and the features of the place developed themselves rapidly, the same as the ships of a fleet stand out in bold relief as the smoke of their cannon rolls away. In this case, however, the smoke did *not* dissipate: but the eyes of the commercial traveller grew accustomed to it—and when the scene became fully apparent, his first impulse was to turn aside in loathing and effect a rapid retreat. But the remembrance of the Gallows' Widow's pistol, and a sense of the imprudence of exciting her suspicions, or of strengthening them if she already entertained any with regard to the object of his visit to the Beggar's Staff,—all this flashed to his mind and prompted him to assume as courageous an air and as unembarrassed a demeanour as possible.

The Gallows' Widow, on her entrance, was warmly greeted by several of the men and women present; and one or two drawing her aside, spoke to her in whispers—their manner indicating that they were asking questions relative to her companion. Her replies were evidently satisfactory, though hurried; and, beckoning Page to accompany her, she conducted him straight up to the bar. Carotty Poll obligingly opened the little gate or door which closed the barrier at the side; and the Gallows' Widow, exchanging a familiar nod with that female, entered the parlour, followed by Page.

The Big Beggarman attended upon them, closing the door behind him; and the commercial traveller now found himself in a little room, scarcely large enough to hold six persons, and dimly lighted by a single candle. The walls were black with smoke and dirt;—the floor was strewed with sand;—and the scanty furniture was old and ricketty. A small, low door stood at one end of the place.

"Well, what news, my beauty?" demanded the Beggarman, addressing the Gallows' Widow in a familiar tone; "and who is this swell-cove?" he inquired, glancing towards the commercial traveller.

"The affair of the pocket-book," was the Gallows' Widow's laconic answer as she took a seat.

"Ain't it settled, then?" asked the landlord.

"Yes: and the gentleman wants to see my man," responded the female. "But to speak candidly, I am suspicious—I am afraid there is something wrong; and therefore we had better question him first."

"Oh! that's it—eh?" exclaimed the Beggarman: and taking up the candle, he held it close to the countenance of the commercial traveller, saying, "If so be he means treachery, I shall see it depicted in his visage—and then I'm blowed if we don't make a stiff 'un of him in no time."

This menace caused Page's blood to run cold in his veins: but arming himself with the courage of desperation, and to some degree sustained by the idea that succour was at hand in case of emergency, he underwent the scrutiny of the landlord without moving a muscle of his face. Indeed, he returned the stare of the man with a steady look of calm defiance, and passed through the ordeal in a way which was positively astonishing to himself.

"It's all right—or I'm deucedly deceived," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, at length replacing the candle upon the table. "But we'll see what the nib-like cove has to say for himself. First, however, I suppose he'll stand a bottle of wine?"

"With great pleasure," observed Page, thrusting his hand into his pocket.

"Port—eh?" said the landlord.

A sign in the affirmative was made by the Gallows' Widow, to whom the query was addressed; and the Big Beggarman speedily produced the wine. Then having placed glasses on the table, he took a chair, bidding Page imitate his example.

"And now, my good sir," said the bloated fellow, after having filled the glasses; "you will perhaps taste the lush and then favour us with an explanation relative to this visit."

"The wine is good," observed the commercial traveller, setting down the glass which he had emptied, and paying a compliment to the Port which it was far from deserving. "But to come to business, I must ask what guarantee I have that you won't peach against me for anything I am going to say, supposing you and your friends refuse to join in the matter."

"This isn't the shop where it's necessary to put such questions, my good gentleman," responded the Beggarman. "Three inches of cold steel under the ribs is the reward we give for treachery—and as the Thames runs pretty handy, there's no difficulty in disposing of the dead'un."

"Well, I will trust you," said Page, who had appeared to hesitate only for the purpose of giving a better colour to the part he was playing. "The truth is I'm a commercial traveller——"

"In the employ of Hodson and Morley of Wood Street," interrupted the Beggarman; "and your name's Page. Go on."

"How did you know all that?" demanded the bag-man, in astonishment.

"The pocket-book was our authority," answered the landlord. "What! do you suppose we didn't overhaul it while it was in our keeping?"

"Ah!—true!" ejaculated Page. "Well, the fact is that this affair of the robbery made my employers so cursed suspicious—as it naturally might—that they insisted in going into my accounts; and I wasn't very well prepared for the investigation."

"That's the case with a many of you trav'l-men," observed the landlord.

"Unfortunately it is," returned the commercial traveller. "You see we are naturally a jovial set and when we get together——"

"Pray go on as quick as possible, sir," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, in a tone of impatience.

"I beg your pardon for digressing," said Page. "To come to the point, then, I am placed in a very awkward predicament. My accounts are most disagreeably inaccurate—and I stand a chance of having to give an explanation to the Lord Mayor, and afterwards to the Recorder of London, unless I can get together a couple of hundred pounds by the day after to-morrow."

"And so you think that it would be as well to finger some of your employers' hard cash, in order to pay them in their own coin?" observed the Beggarman. "I begin to twig, you see," he added with a knowing wink.

"You're just right," responded Page. "If I am to be transported, it may as well be for a burglary as for embezzlement—and that's the plain English of it."

"Spoken like a man!" cried the Big Beggarman exultingly. "The thing 's as clear as daylight," he added, turning towards the Gallows' Widow: "this gentleman will assist in robbing his employers; and therefore we must suppose that he is well acquainted with the place where they keep their cash and the probable amount that is to be got by the venture."

"I know that they never have less than seven or eight hundred pounds in the strong-box," said Page; "and I should not be fool enough to risk the matter unless I was convinced that success is certain."

"We may let him see the Magsman," observed the Gallows' Widow, in her abrupt, laconic way: for the suspicions which she had previously entertained were now almost completely dissipated. "Follow me, sir," she added; and rising from her seat, the woman opened the little door already mentioned.

"Take the candle with you, my gal," said the Beggarman. "I must remain at the bar; for there's no lack of customers to-night."

The Gallows' Widow took up the light, and began to ascend a staircase so steep and narrow that it was a wonder to Page how such a bloated personage as the landlord could ever force himself into so circumscribed a space: for that he *was* occasionally compelled to pass that way to the upper regions of the house, the commercial traveller naturally conceived.

The landing on the first floor was very small, and had two doors opening from it: but the woman, pausing not there, commenced the ascent of another flight as ladder-like as the former; and on reaching the top, she led the way into a large loft immediately beneath the angular roof.

Page looked rapidly around, in the expectation of beholding the Magsman: for as there appeared to be no other door than the one by which they had just entered the place, he as a matter of course presumed that they had reached their destination.

He was however mistaken.

Giving Page the candle to hold, the Gallows' Widow speedily removed a quantity of straw that

was heaped up in one corner; and raising a trap-door, she commenced the descent of a flight of steps, bidding the commercial traveller to follow her.

He obeyed; but at this instant it struck him that should the Magsman suspect his treacherous purpose and seek to do him a mischief, how could he possibly summon the Bow Street Officers to his assistance?—how were they to learn whither he had been conducted?

Again did a cold tremor come over him: but experiencing a full sense of the necessity of maintaining his presence of mind, he summoned all his courage to his aid, and followed the woman with a firm step.

At the bottom of the stairs she threw open a door; and in another moment the commercial traveller was introduced into the presence of Joe the Magsman.

This redoubtable individual was seated in a small chamber, furnished in a far more comfortable style than the other portions of the house which Page had as yet seen; and the bed, which stood in an alcove, or deep recess, was clean and neat in appearance. The walls were papered: there was a thick curtain over the small window;—and a piece of carpet was stretched upon the floor.

The Magsman was about forty years of age,—very tall—powerfully built—and remarkably broad across the shoulders. But his countenance was precisely that which a novelist would describe or an artist depict as belonging to a villain of the most desperate character. His coal-black hair was rough and coarse: his brows were thick and long, overhanging small and restless eyes;—and his bushy whiskers encroached on his face even to the cheek bones. He was dressed in a shabby and negligent manner; and when Page was introduced by the Gallows' Widow into his presence, he was lounging in an arm-chair smoking a pipe.

"Ah! my fine fellow," he exclaimed, the moment the commercial traveller stood before him; "I needn't ask who you are—for I had a pretty good glimpse of your face last night in the lane. Sit down, my boy—and let us know what has brought you here. Lizzy my dear," he added, turning towards the Gallows' Widow, "put the bingo out upon the table."

The woman produced a bottle of brandy and some glasses from a cupboard, and then took a seat near her paramour.

"I suppose it's all right about the pocket-book?" said the Magsman.

"Yes—and here is the money," returned the Gallows' Widow, handing the ruffian the bag of gold which he tossed upon the bed. "This gentleman wishes some particular business to be done—and that is why I brought him. The Beggarman heard his story; and we agreed that he might be introduced to you without farther delay."

"And what is the nature of the business?" demanded the man.

Page forthwith repeated the same tale which he had already narrated in the parlour below; and the robber listened attentively.

"Well—what do you think of this, Lizzy?" he said, turning towards his mistress, when Page had done speaking.

"I think that it is all straightforward enough; or else I should not have brought him up here," was the answer. "I must however observe that I did entertain certain suspicions before we entered the house; for, according to my usual custom when bringing a stranger here, I stopped and made this gentleman stop also in a dark place just to ascertain whether any body in the shape of an officer was dogging us. Three men passed by, one after another, and at short intervals; but it was too dark to form an idea what they were. They however all three turned into Horslydown: and I confess that I didn't like it. But it might have been a false alarm on my part; and the conduct of this gentleman has since made me think it was."

While the Gallows' Widow was speaking, the Magsman's eyes were fixed not exactly suspiciously—but searchingly—upon the commercial traveller, who sustained this steadfast, scrutinizing gaze without wincing.

The Magsman seemed satisfied; and Mr. Page, perceiving that the result was in his favour, felt more at ease.

"And how do you propose to carry this business into execution?" demanded the robber, after sipping his brandy-and-water in a leisurely way.

"Hodson and Morley's place of business is in Wood Street, as you know already," answered Page, "and Hodson lives on the premises."

"How many men are there in the house at night?" interrupted the thief.

"Three," was the response: "Hodson—a man-servant—and the porter, who sleeps in the kitchen, a bed being made up for him on purpose."

"And of course he has fire-arms within reach?"

"Not that I know of. But there's a watchman in the street all night: he is paid by the inhabitants."

"And therefore he walks up and down," observed the Magsman: "so that while he's at one part of the street, we can be commencing operations in another."

"Exactly so," answered Page. "The cash-box is kept in an iron safe let into the wall in the counting-house, which is in the back ware-room; and there will be some trouble in picking the lock of that safe."

"Leave the matter to me," said the Magsman, in a tone of confidence. "D'ye think I'll have much trouble in opening it, Lizzy—eh?" he demanded, turning with a chuckle towards his mistress.

"Not much, Joe," she replied, laughing in a low quiet manner which did Page harm to hear it: for he fancied that a woman who could laugh in that strange way, was capable of any atrocity—there was something so unnatural in it!

"Where ought the entrance into the house to be attempted?" demanded the Magsman, after a brief pause.

"That is the difficulty!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, assuming a tone of vexation. "The front-door is precious strong and well chained and bolted; and the shutters to the warehouse-window are not a very insignificant barrier. If there was much noise made, the porter would be sure to wake up down-stairs."

"And there's no means of getting in at the back?" asked the robber.

"None that I know of," replied Page, purposely avoiding the creation of a suspicion by representing the business as one that had few difficulties in the way.

"Well—it must be attempted in front, then," said the Magsman. "We must manage to get down

one of the shutters—take out a square of glass—shove in a boy to open the front-door—and pop up the shutter again before the watchman comes along. The course is clear enough now it is difficult, and even dangerous—but a mere flea-bite to things that I have done in my time."

Here again the Gallows' Widow laughed in her quiet way, as if it were to herself.

"Well," resumed the Magsman, "so far we have settled the matter. Now, where do we meet to-morrow night at about a quarter to twelve o'clock?"

"Name your own place—and I will be there to a minute," answered Page, delighted to think that the interview was drawing to an end.

"There's a flash-house in Grub Street, called the *Kinchin-Ken*," said the Magsman, after a few moments' reflection. "You will be there at a quarter to twelve: and it would be as well, perhaps," added the ruffian, "if you was to come in the shabbiest clothes you have."

"I will not forget," responded Page.

"Not in that slap-up cloak, mind," observed the Magsman: "but try and look as much like *one of us* as you can. The Kinchin-Ken is a noted house for young prigs—and there'll be a many there at the time; so that if you go amongst them in swell toggery it may be disagreeable."

"I shall bear in mind all you tell me," said Page, rising from his seat; and, having emptied his glass, he wished the robber a good night.

"Good-night, my ben-cull," returned the man extending his huge hand which the commercial traveller was compelled to shake: then, as Page turned towards the door, the robber said in a low, hurried, and scarcely audible whisper to the Gallows' Widow, "*Let one of the pals speel after the jagger and lour his lag.*"*

The woman darted a look of intelligence at her

* Let one of the comrades go after the gentleman and watch which way he goes.

paramour; and taking up the candle which she had brought with her, followed Page from the room.

They ascended the flight of steps leading to the loft; and there the woman replaced the trap-door which she covered with the straw. Thence they retraced their way to the little parlour down stairs; and Page, having wished the Big Beggarman, his daughter, and the Gallows' Widow good night, issued in safety from the Beggar's Staff.

But scarcely had he proceeded ten yards up the street, when a man darted from the establishment—crossed over the way—and, keeping in the black shade of the houses on that side, cautiously dogged the steps of the commercial traveller.

This individual pursued his way, quite unconscious of being thus watched, and wondering why Mr. Grumley and his men had remained so quiet,—a circumstance which he did not however regret, inasmuch as it had prevented a conflict wherein he himself might have been either killed or seriously injured. On reaching the corner of Horslydown, he turned into Pickled Herring Street, when some one, emerging from the very recess where he and the Gallows' Widow had concealed themselves on their way to the Beggar's Staff, said in a low and hurried tone, "Is that you, Mr. Page?"

"Yes," responded the commercial traveller, startled by the abruptness of the incident.

"Then come here for a moment," resumed the man who had spoken; and the half dragged Page into the recess, saying in the same whispering tone, "Grumley set me here to watch for you. There's another of us out thither end of Horslydown—and so we was sure not to miss you somehow. Grumley says the thing can't be done to-night, even if so be the Magsman *is* there—'cause the place is too full. He must see you at the office in Bow Street in the morning."

"Very good," answered Page. "I have settled everything,—and it's much better to put it off till to-morrow. The Magsman will then be sure to fall into our hands."

"That's all right," observed the officer. "We was afraid you'd be lurking about if you didn't meet any of us at once—and p'raps some of them prigs would have seen you. That's why we stayed to keep a look-out for you."

"Thank'ee for your kindness," responded Page. "I was indeed wondering why I didn't hear or see anything of you. Good night."

"Good night, sir," answered the constable;—and they separated, the commercial traveller continuing his way along Pickled Herring Street.

But the whole of this colloquy was overheard by the spy set to dog Page's footsteps; and five minutes afterwards every syllable was duly reported to those whom it concerned at the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. HARLEY.

We must now return to Paradise Villas.

Several hours had elapsed since the departure of Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith, with their domestics, in the travelling-carriage; and the sisters were just sitting down to the afternoon repast in the back-parlour, when a hackney-coach drove up to the door. A middle-aged man, dressed in black, with a white neckcloth, and having the appearance of a valet, or "gentleman's gentleman," hastily alighted; and while he quietly traversed the little garden and gave a loud knock at the door, the coachman took two or three small hampers out of the vehicle.

The char-woman having answered the summons, the individual in black requested to speak to Miss Clarendon; and he was accordingly shown into the front-parlour, where the sisters immediately joined him.

"I have the honour to be in the service of Mr. Harley, ladies," said the valet, with a low bow and speaking in a tone of deep respect. "My master has directed me to call in order to apologise for his abrupt departure the evening before last, but the cause of which he will satisfactorily explain when next he has the pleasure of seeing you. He has likewise made me the bearer of some game and hot-house fruit, which he hopes you will condescend to accept; and, lastly, he has desired me to intimate that if you are likely to be perfectly disengaged this evening, he will do himself the honour of waiting upon you for an hour, in order to give those explanations to which I have alluded."

"You will have the kindness to give our respectful compliments to Mr. Harley," said Octavia, whose heart palpitated with a joy till then unknown,—"and assure him that although we accept his handsome present through proper courtesy, we are nevertheless grieved that he should have endeavoured to make any return for such trifling hospitality as we were enabled to afford him. We are not aware of any engagement for this evening; but at the same time we must beg you to observe to Mr. Harley that it is quite unnecessary for him to take the trouble of calling merely for the purpose of explaining the motive of his sudden departure the other night."

"Your message, Miss Clarendon, shall be duly delivered," said the valet, with another low bow. "My master instructed me to inquire after the ladies who met with the accident in their travelling-barouche. He hopes——"

"They were fortunate enough to escape without injury," observed Octavia; "and they are no longer beneath our roof."

"Pardon me for having so long intruded upon you, Miss Clarendon," said the valet; and, with another obeisance, he took his departure.

The hampers which he brought with him, had been deposited by the hackney-coachman in the passage during the interval occupied by the preceding colloquy; and the sisters now proceeded to examine them. There was a quantity of the finest forced fruit, which could not have been purchased in Covent Garden Market for less than twenty guineas;—and there were two brace of pheasants and a couple of hares.

The sisters were much gratified by the delicate attention exhibited by Mr. Harley; and Octavia's heart smote her for having so emphatically denounced his conduct in quitting them with such abruptness on the night when they first formed his acquaintance. She even looked forward with secret pleasure to his promised visit for the evening: but she did not suffer this sentiment to become known to her sister.

At about five o'clock Octavia proposed that they

should make such improvements to their toilette as she alleged to be suitable for the reception of a guest who was evidently accustomed to move in the best society; and Pauline, though more indifferent in the matter than her sister, readily assented. They accordingly assumed their best apparel: and they did not forget to adorn themselves with the jewellery which they had received from Mrs. Smith.

Never had either Octavia or Pauline appeared to greater advantage than on the present occasion. The corsage of their gowns being very low, according to the fashion of the time, would have left their white and gracefully sloping shoulders completely uncovered, had not the luxuriant curls showered down upon them—wantoning also over the rich contours that shaped their firm, plump, and well-rounded busts.

The glance of an experienced eye would have however shown that Octavia had devoted more care than Pauline to her toilette. The younger sister was satisfied when the mirror told her that she looked as well as ever she did in her best apparel: but Octavia had studied to excel on this special occasion. Never had she bestowed so much pains upon that glorious auburn hair which in its warm and sunny hues seemed to indicate the ardent nature of her temperament: never had she stood so long before the glass to admire those deep blue eyes which now seemed melting with voluptuous languor;—and never had she before thought of observing which smiles imparted the sweetest expression to her moist red lips, or set off her brilliant teeth to the greatest advantage. She felt proud and happy in the consciousness of transcendent loveliness; and as she cast a slow, lingering look over her entire form as it was reflected in the long mirror, her cheeks flushed with exultation and her neck arched superbly as if in anticipation of some triumph which her charms were destined to achieve.

And now behold the two sisters seated in the front parlour, one on either side of the cheerful fire that blazes in the grate. The curtains are drawn over the window—the lamp diffuses a softly golden lustre throughout the small but comfortable room—and the table is spread with the tea-things, which give an air of such perfect domesticity to the scene that a prince, had he been present, would have gladly accepted the invitation of those beautiful girls to join them in the humble meal.

Pauline was whiling away the time with a romance: Octavia was absorbed in her reflections. These were however by no means disagreeable: for, with the sanguine disposition characteristic of her age and her inexperience, she had fallen into a train of thought which gradually led her on to a shadowing forth of her own views of happiness—that delightful castle-building upon the golden sands of the future!

The expected coming of Mr. Harley had led her to reflect upon his handsome person—the easy elegance of his address—the nobility of his air—his melodious yet manly voice—the irresistible sweetness of his smile—and the fascinating style of his conversation. Then she remembered that he had declared himself to be unmarried—and an involuntary sigh stole upward from her bosom. She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks and her very ears tingling with the blushful glow; and though she started for a moment and was even vexed with herself for having allowed the sigh to follow the reminiscence, yet at the next instant she plunged again into a delicious reverie, wherein her girlish bashfulness gave way to a yielding softness and a dreamy voluptuous mood.

Suddenly a loud knock at the front-door startled Pauline from her book and Octavia from her meditations; and the latter awoke to what appeared to be a guilty consciousness of having made him whom he was now about to enter, the hero of her thoughts. Again did the blood rush to her cheeks; and the warm glow, not having had time to ebb away as Mr. Harley was ushered into the room, overspread her lovely countenance once more with a renewed suffusion.

Mr. Harley pressed Pauline's hand with a friendly cordiality: but so enraptured was he by the blushing and voluptuous charms of Octavia, that he carried *her* hand hastily to his lips and imprinted upon it a fervent kiss. So sudden was this movement that Octavia had not time to resist, even if she had possessed the inclination; and so rapidly was it accomplished, that Pauline did not observe it. A tide of happiness appeared to rush in to the elder sister's soul: it seemed to her as if she had unexpectedly and all in a moment experienced the realization of a delicious dream;—and indescribable sensations of bliss came over her like a warm glow, as if she had just quaffed a goblet of champagne.

Mr. Harley was a thorough man of the world, and deeply versed in all the mysteries and intricacies of the human heart. But especially was he an able anatomist of the female mind, which he could dissect and comprehend in an instant. The emotions experienced by Octavia were not lost upon him: he perceived and deciphered them almost as soon as they had sprung into existence;—and he saw in a moment that he was not indifferent to her. She had not withdrawn her hand—she had uttered no ejaculation when he pressed it to his lips—nor had she resented his conduct. The blush that suffused her cheeks, was indicative of a deep and burning joy—and not an evidence of indignation;—and Mr. Harley knew by the melting voluptuousness which beamed in her eyes, and by the profound heaving of her swelling bosom, and the sympathetic thrill which shot through every vein in her fair hand during the few seconds that he held it in his grasp,—by all these symptoms was he assured that he had only to demand the love of Octavia Clarendon in order to obtain it.

"Perceiving the preparations which had been made on the table, Mr. Harley declared that if there were one thing that he longed for more than another in the shape of refreshment at that moment, it was a cup of tea; and this assurance induced Pauline to bustle about all the more actively, while the guest seated himself next to Octavia.

"We have to thank you, Mr. Harley," said this young lady, her bosom palpitating with the subsiding of her emotions, even as the swell remains on the surface of the ocean after the storm has passed, —"we have to thank you for the handsome present you sent us this afternoon——"

"A mere trifle—not worthy of your acceptance," interrupted the visitor; "but it consisted of the only things I could heap together in a hurry, for the purpose of proving that you were not absent from my thoughts—as you, indeed, never can be," he added in a low and hasty whisper aside to Octavia, and with strong emphasis on the pronoun. "But I promised you certain explanations," he continued almost immediately, perceiving that the elder sister's com-

fusion was such as to be likely to attract the notice of Pauline: "at least, I hope that my valet Edwards did not omit to mention the fact that I knew an apology to be necessary for my abrupt, unaccountable, and apparently rude departure the night before last."

"Your domestic obeyed your orders with exactitude Mr. Harley," said Octavia, now recovering her self-possession: "but we require no explanation—being well aware," she added, timidly, "that you are incapable of acting with intentional rudeness."

"A thousand thanks, Miss Clarendon—*dear* Miss Clarendon—for your kind opinion of me," exclaimed Mr. Harley, fixing upon her a look of indescribable tenderness, which she involuntarily returned—for she was not mistress of her actions, much less of her emotions. "I *must*, however, in justice to myself as well as from respect to you, explain the reasons of my precipitate disappearance. But first permit me to ask whether those ladies happened to mention to you who they were ——"

"One was a Mrs. Mordaunt—and the other a Mrs. Smith," answered Pauline: "but Octavia and I had our suspicions on that head," she added, archly.

"Indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Harley, darting a keen and searching look upon the younger sister: "and what might those suspicions be, Miss Pauline?"

"Oh! we thought it very probable that they might be great ladies travelling *incognito*," returned the laughing girl, as she desisted for a moment from her occupation of pouring out the tea.

"Not unlikely," observed Mr. Harley, with a peculiar dryness of manner which might have been even taken for covert satire had the sisters been experienced enough thus to comprehend it: then, instantly resuming his usual bland, affable, and peculiarly gentlemanly tone and deportment, he said, "I presume that Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Mordaunt did not make any allusion to me?"

"None," replied Pauline. "But did you happen to know those ladies, then? I should scarcely think so—or else you would not have run away so ungallantly," added the young maiden in a playful manner.

"Ah! now you remind me that I have yet to give you a certain explanation," said Mr. Harley: "and I will delay it no longer. The truth is, then, that in those ladies belonging to the broken chariot, I recognised near relatives of the ungrateful friend who had placed me in a temporary embarrassment; and so irritated became my feelings at the time that I knew not what I did. Acting without the least forethought, and only in obedience to the impulse of the moment, I hurried away in order to avoid the necessity of even exchanging a word with those whose presence awoke such painful reminiscences."

"Then you were acquainted with the two ladies?" said Octavia; "and you can inform us whether they have their real names, or whether the romantic notion of my sister Pauline be correct?"

"Yes—dear Miss Clarendon—they did not deceive you in respect to their names," answered Mr. Harley: "as who indeed would deceive *you* in anything?" he added, sinking his voice to the lowest whisper and availing himself of the opportunity afforded by Pauline's turning aside for the moment to cut up a cake.

The tea was now served round—and not only did Mr. Harley force himself to swallow two cups of a beverage which he in reality detested, but also managed to eat a slice of cake though he knew it would disagree with him. But he was well aware of the immense strides he should thus make in the good graces of these artless, frank, and good-natured girls by adapting himself familiarly to their comparatively homely habits; and thus by the time that the old char-woman was summoned to clear the table, he had as it were insinuated himself into a position of as friendly an intimacy as if they had known him for a dozen years.

But then his manners were so fascinating—his conversation so delightful—and his attentions so constant, and yet so delicate. Without an effort and also without affectation, he displayed a perfect acquaintance with the literature of the country—made striking comments upon the passing events of the day—and related several amusing anecdotes relative to those great men of the age whose names were in every body's mouth;—then, with an easy and apparently quite natural transition, he slided glibly into a critique upon the last new dramas produced at the national theatres, and by a few rapid remarks on the musical talent in vogue at the time, proved his exquisite taste and delicate perception in respect to the divine art.

In this manner the time passed rapidly away: minutes flew by with silent wings, until they accumulated into hours; and when the clock struck ten, Pauline quitted the room in order to give directions for supper.

The moment Octavia found herself alone with Mr. Harley, a species of tremor came over her—not of pain, nor yet altogether of pleasure,—but a strange commingling of the two, such as when hope and fear retain the soul in the excitement of suspense.

"Oh! what happiness have I experienced this evening!" exclaimed Harley, turning towards the blushing, trembling maiden, and bending upon her a look full of the most melting fondness. "The few hours that I have passed with you, lovely Octavia, have appeared to me an elysian felicity—an interval so full of heavenly bliss, that it were worth while to give the ten best years of one's existence to enjoy it again! Yes, adorable girl," he continued, his tone becoming more fervent and his manner more impassioned,—"I loved you the first moment that I beheld you—and ever since you have not once been absent from my thoughts! I have cherished your image—I shall ever cherish it," he exclaimed, seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips in rapture.

"Mr. Harley—I implore you—oh! I conjure you—nay, I command you — release me," faltered Octavia, a deeper blush suffusing her countenance while her eyes appeared to swim in a liquid langour and her bosom palpitated with a variety of conflicting emotions, joy and fear preponderating.

"Nay—do not seek to deprive me of this fair hand, Octavia!" said Mr. Harley, throwing himself on his knees before her, and gluing his lips to the hand which he still retained in his own and which the bewildered girl exerted herself but feebly to withdraw "do not dash away the cup of happiness and hope which you have raised to my lips! I love you, Octavia—I adore you,—for you are all that is beautiful, and good, and excellent to be beloved! And believe me, sweet girl, when I take heaven to witness that never until now have I known what true love is

—never until I saw you did I experience the exquisite bliss that attends on that passion! Look upon me, Octavia—do not avert your eyes," he continued, with all the winning eloquence of his seductive tongue: "turn upon me those glances that flash like lightning through my veins—let me contemplate my own soul speaking in your eloquent orbs—suffer me to read the delightful language of hope in the glorious beauty of your looks!"

Bewildered and rejoicing—with indefinable feelings of fear mingling with a thrilling exultation,—partly succumbing to an influence which she could not control, and partly yielding to the impulse of her inclinations,—Octavia bent down her head until her long, glossy auburn tresses showered over the shoulders of Harley, as he knelt at her feet—and her polished, warm forehead came in contact with his fine and open, but flushed and heated brow.

Starting from his suppliant posture, he threw his arms around the yielding maiden—pressed her to his bosom—murmured words of impassioned ardour and vows of eternal love,—and imprinted innumerable kisses on her glowing features.

At length extricating herself from his embrace, and hurriedly smoothing her dress and arranging her disordered hair, she turned upon him a look of mingled tenderness and reproach: but he strove to seize her fair hand in his own.

"Release me—for God's sake let me go!" she murmured: "my sister will return in a moment——"

"And I will tell her that I love—that I adore you, charming Octavia!" interrupted Harley.

"No—no—not yet!" said Octavia, yielding to him her hand, and holding down her blushing countenance. "Consider, Mr. Harley——"

"Call me by my Christian name, dearest,—call me George," he exclaimed, passing his arm round her waist and drawing her gently towards him, until his cheek rested upon the glossy surface of her radiant hair.

"Consider then, George," she proceeded in a low, tremulous, yet tender tone, which seemed like the sound of a silver bell oscillating in a strong breeze,—"consider that we have known each other for so short a time—that my father is absent——"

"Well, then, my angel, we will for the present conceal our love," said Harley. "But *do* you—*can* you love me? Oh! now upon your reply all my happiness reposes!"

"And were I to answer in the affirmative," said the rejoicing, exulting, but trembling girl, "you would think——"

"Only that you are as kind and tender as you are beautiful!"

"What words would you have me speak?—Oh! what would you have me say?" murmuringly inquired the agitated girl.

"I would have you tell me that you love me!—yes, love me as I love you!" responded Harley. "Tell me this, sweet maid!—adorable Octavia!—tell me this, and make me happy!—Oh! immeasurably happy!"

"But—but," she murmured, "if I did, you would deem me bold—forward—rash—inconsiderate——"

"Oh! no—no! I can never entertain a sentiment injurious to you, my beloved Octavia!" interrupted George Harley: then, drawing her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, he said, "Tell me, therefore, that you *do* love me—or at least assure me that I am not indifferent to you! Look up, my angel—turn your heavenly countenance towards me—and now let me behold those delicious lips frame the delightful words, '*I love thee!*'"

"Oh! who can resist your winning eloquence!" murmured Octavia, whose beauteous eyes expressed all the tenderness of an engrossing passion: then, after a few moment's pause, she exclaimed, "Yes, George—I love thee!"

Again did the enraptured Harley imprint a thousand kisses upon her flushed and glowing countenance: again and again did he clasp her to his breast—and he could feel her bosom throbbing against his chest like the undulations of a mighty tide ebbing to and fro. Octavia was lost as it were in a new world of ineffable bliss: she felt like one who has suddenly passed from the monotony of a well-known and long familiar clime into a glorious land where streams are most pearly, foliage most green, flowers most beautiful, fruits most luscious, and the air most fragrant;—and, forgetful of the past as well as reckless of the future, she abandoned herself to all the ecstacy, the delirium, and the glow of a new and transcendently blissful existence. It was a full sensation of love that the beauteous maiden thus experienced; and it was a species of poetic sensuousness that surrounded her as with a halo—bathing the cheeks in crimson hue and pouring a flood of light into the swimming eyes!

While thus locked in Harley's fond embrace, Octavia thought not of her sister—nor of the danger of being discovered in that position—nor of anything save the elysian bliss which she derived from the new sentiments that animated her and the paradise which had thus been opened to her imagination's enjoyment: and had opportunity served—had there been no fear of the sudden return of Pauline—Harley would have found her then and there an easy conquest. But strong though his passions were, yet was he enabled to command a certain amount of presence of mind;—and gently separating from the confiding, loving girl, he said, "This is a heavenly dream of happiness in which all worldly thoughts are absorbed! But we must exercise prudence, my angel—and 'tis now for *me* to remind you that Pauline will soon return. Tell me, sweetest girl, can you possibly find an excuse to go out alone for an hour or two to-morrow evening? Nay—start not—I have so many things to tell you—so much to say to you, my beloved Octavia!"

"Oh! do not ask me to act with such duplicity towards my sister!" murmured the young lady.

"Duplicity, dearest?" said Harley, with a well-feigned air of surprise, yet blended with the softness of a re-assuring smile

"Oh, yes!—duplicity!" repeated Octavia. "Would it not be duplicity—deceit—dissimulation——"

"Heavens! that I should be deemed capable of urging you, my charmer, to such a course!" again interrupted the man of the world, with another look of surprise. "No—never! I love you too well, Octavia! Hear me!"

"I will—I will! Speak! What do you mean?" asked the trembling girl.

"'Twas you yourself, my charmer, who implored me not to proclaim my love in the presence of Pauline," said Harley. "But if you have no confidence in me, Octavia—if you fancy for a moment that I would counsel you in any way to your own injury or disgrace," he added, his tone suddenly assuming a hauteur mingled with reproach,—"then am I unworthy of your affection!"

"Oh! now you are angry with me, George," she faltered, while tears started forth upon her long dark lashes.

"No—no, my adored girl—I cannot be angry with you," exclaimed Harley, kissing away her tears. "Only promise that you will meet me to-morrow evening——"

"I will," murmured Octavia, in a tone that was scarcely audible.

"Thanks, dearest—a thousand thanks," returned Harley; and the joyousness of his tone and manner excited such ineffable pleasure in the bosom of Octavia, as to stifle the momentary remorse which had stricken her with a sudden pang when her lips breathed an assent to her lover's prayer. "To-morrow evening, then, my beloved one, we shall meet again!" he continued, in his tenderest and most seductive tones. "The place of appointment shall be at the very respectable and fashionable millinery establishment of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall. At six o'clock I shall be there, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the most lovely and best-beloved of women. Tell me, then, Octavia—tell me that I shall not experience disappointment."

The too-confiding girl breathed the required promise; and Harley, with difficulty veiling the triumphant feelings which animated him, now besought her to compose herself in such a manner that Pauline might not suspect the tender understanding which existed between them. This was by no means an easy task for Octavia to achieve, so full of ecstatic feelings was her soul. But love is often wonderfully suggestive of what may be termed a venial duplicity; and the young lady accordingly succeeded in concealing the ardour of her passion beneath a studied reserve—so that the evening passed away without affording the slightest ground for exciting a suspicion on Pauline's part.

Mr. Harley partook of the supper which had been prepared; and during the meal his conversation grew more animated, sparkling, and attractive than ever. Octavia was charmed and fascinated—and there were moments when she could have thrown off her reserve, started from her seat, and flung her arms about his neck, claiming him as her lover in the presence of Pauline: but, though it was painful to restrain her feelings beneath the iron control of prudence, she nevertheless succeeded in thus exercising a severe domination over them. On the other hand, Pauline was gay, sprightly, and in excellent spirits; but while she admired Mr. Harley's brilliant qualifications, and even felt proud of possessing such an acquaintance, she shared not in the softer and more tender feelings that had acquired such empire over her more yielding, sensitive, and impassioned sister.

It was nearly midnight when Mr. Harley rose to take his leave; and Octavia accompanied him as far as the garden-gate.

"You will not forget your promise for to-morrow evening, my angel?" he whispered, as he hastily but fervently pressed her hand to his lips.

"No!" she murmured in a scarcely audible tone—and they separated—Harley departing to gloat in anticipation over the conquest which he hoped full soon to achieve—and Octavia returning into the villa, to dream of the man who had obtained such empire over her soul.

CHAPTER X.

THE KINCHIN-KEN.—THE TABLES TURNED.

In the time of which we are writing, *Grub Street* was the un-euphonious and repulsive appellation of that long, narrow, and dirty lane in the Cripplegate district, which now bears the name of *Milton Street*. At the present day the features of that thoroughfare are none of the most inviting: but at the close of the eighteenth century, the aspect of the place was disgusting and villanous in the extreme. There was not a vestige of pavement; and the ground was so uneven and rugged, that few vehicles ever ventured that way—for in the fine weather they stood a chance of being overturned by the mounds of concrete dirt that dotted the lane, and in the rainy seasons the wheels were sure to sink into deep ruts.

The houses were of the most miserable description—the shops of the poorest kind. Every dwelling harboured numerous distinct families;—and poverty forced the poor artizan into a close neighbourhood with the avowed thief. The result, in such cases, too often was that the former instead of bringing the latter within the sphere of a commendable industry, became infected with the poison of demoralisation, and in the desperation produced by failure of work, threw himself into the arms of the villain who promised a rich harvest with little trouble in the reaping. Vice and depravity accordingly spread like a pestilence in that locality; and as the first words which infants were taught to lisp were oaths and imprecation, so the last which they uttered in their manhood were too frequently the death-prayer on the gallows!

And who can wonder if Grub Street and its neighbourhood had become a noted academy for the training of thieves,—a seminary whence the ranks of vice, demoralisation, and crime regruited themselves from day to day,—a hideous school of infamy where the preceptors were the wretches' children's own parents?—who can wonder, we again ask, if Newgate, which was so ominously handy, had no fear of finding its felons' wards and its condemned cells deserted, so long as the low lodging-houses, the boozing-kens, the brothels, the receivers' and fences' shops, and all the other dens of iniquity in which Grub Street abounded, flourished in all their fœtid and rank luxuriance—the noxious weeds of the social system.

Reader, take the map of the Great Metropolis—and with "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON" by your side for ready reference, circle with a dark line, either with pen or pencil, each and every loathsome district or neighbourhood which you will find described in the two Series of that work or in the one which you are now perusing. Then calculate the proportion which the haunts of crime and the skulking-places of poverty bear to the localities where comfort is found or where opulence and splendour reign. The result will prove that two-thirds of the

mighty Babylon are covered with a plague-mist of demoralisation, misery, ignorance, wretchedness, squalor, and crime. And yet a thousand towers, pinnacles, and spires point up to heaven, and indicate the houses of God and the temples of worship. Oh! what have the myriad fat and bloated pastors done for the population that swarms in those frightful neighbourhoods?—who can trace in those scenes of depravity the influence of the pulpit, or in those sinks of destitution the beneficence of paternal Government? If a missionary of Religion be ever encountered in such places, be well assured that he belongs not to the Established Church, which is so extravagantly paid by compulsion, but to the sphere of Dissent, which is sustained by voluntary contributions. And, again, if the votary of Education be seen amongst the swarming regions of the poor, rest assured that he is no paid emissary of a National System of Instruction, but a philanthropist who seeks to impart knowledge on an eleemosynary principle!

At the time of which we are writing, there were numerous public-houses and boozing-kens of the vilest description in Grub Street: but none was more notorious, with an evil renown, than a certain flash crib denominated the *Kinchin-Ken*.* As its name implied, it was a resort for juveniles of both sexes,—boy-thieves and prostitutes of the most tender age; and no phase of human depravity was exhibited in more appalling hues even at the Beggar's Staff than at the sink of profligacy of which we are speaking.

Let the reader picture to himself a small room, filled with rude tables and ruder forms,—then, an inner-chamber of smaller dimensions still, and with the door of communication removed so as to afford uninterrupted egress and ingress between the two,—the ceilings blackened with smoke, and the walls stained with innumerable spots of grease,—and about three dozen boys and girls enjoying themselves in a variety of ways by the light of two or three pitiful candles. The atmosphere of the den was rendered pestiferous with the odour of strong onions, the smell of tobacco, and the foetid exhalations from the filthy garments and persons of the profligate horde.

The ages of the inmates of these rooms averaged from ten to sixteen; and the boys all belonged to an organisation having a captain at its head, and bearing the name of the *Kinchin-Priggs*.† This chief was present on the occasion which we are now especially describing. He was lolling on a form, with a short pipe in his mouth, his right arm round the waist of a dirty drab of a girl who was his avowed mistress, and his left hand grasping a chairman's hammer which he rapped energetically upon the table whenever he considered the noise to be growing too clamorous. Great deference was paid to the Kinchin-Grand, as this youth of sixteen was denominated;—and certainly if the most hang-dog countenance ever seen, uniting in all its lineaments every sign of dissipation with inveterate profligacy, low cunning, and a certain expression of villanous shrewdness,—if such were the qualifications necessary for the chief of this pestiferous society, then did the Kinchin-Grand well deserve the "best eminence" to which he had risen.

We may as well observe that his paramour was about his own age: her face was pale and sickly with the vicious courses which she led, though her form was bloated and precociously matured from the same cause;—and her features indicated a compound of low cunning and brazen assurance. She was known amongst her associates as *Shichster Sal**—the titular portion of the name being acquired from the fact that this wretched young girl had been well and even tenderly brought up until about the age of twelve, when she was enticed away from her home and parents by some vile old woman; and ever since she had clung to the life of dissipation and profligacy which we now find her pursuing.

It wanted about twenty minutes to the midnight hour, when Mr. Page, dressed in the shabbiest suit of clothes which the porter at Hodson and Morley's had to lend him, and with his face and hands purposely smeared over with dirt, entered the Kinchin-Ken. But scarcely had he reached the threshold of the door opening into the front room, when the scene that burst upon his sight produced such a poignant sensation of loathing, that he stood for a few moments almost motionless with mingled surprise, horror, and disgust. For simultaneously as his eyes were seared by the spectacle of half-naked girls and wretched boys wrapped in rags, all engaged in a hideous orgie—his ears were assailed by the jabber of many tongues, all enunciating language of the most obscene, filthy, and profane description. In fact, the Beggar's Staff was a perfect paradise compared with this pandemonium that now broke upon his view; and the society he had seen at the former place appeared angels of light in contrast with the juvenile specimens of brutalised humanity that were huddled together in the Kinchin-Ken.

"Oh! I say, Bill—here's a feller a-comin' whose face is quite unbeknown," exclaimed one of the thieves, catching sight of Mr. Page: "we'll make him stand a pot or two, or I'm jiggered! Come in, old feller—don't stand on nothink like ceremony—we'll make room for yer."

Page, recovering his self-possession, instantly accepted the invitation thus blurted forth at the top of a voice which sounded like an asthmatic bag-pipe; and immediately three or four little wretches of boys and girls made a place for him at their table—giggling heartily amongst themselves while he was taking his seat, as if it were excellent fun.

"Now then, old feller, wot'll yer stand?" demanded the youth who had already addressed him. "Our lush is heavy yet, yer see," he continued, turning a pewter pot upside down to prove that it was empty.

"I shall be very glad to stand a few quarts of beer for this good company," said Page, throwing into his manner and voice as much coarseness as he could, and at the same time flinging two or three shillings down upon the table.

"Bravvo!" ejaculated several voices: "bravvo—bravvo—bravvo—oh!" shouted the rest, taking up the chorus; and when order was restored by the rapping of the Kinchin-Grand's hammer upon the table, the landlord of the place made his appearance from some back premises.

"Well—what is it now?" demanded that individual, who was a short, thin, dirty old man, with a very wrinkled and cadaverous countenance and surly looks.

"Here's a feller as is gonto to stand heavy yet for

* Literally "Children's-house." † Children-Thieves.

* *Shichster* means "Lady."

as all," responded the Kinchin-Grand: "so look alive, Old Bloak, and bring in the lush."

The landlord's features underwent a species of grim relaxation as he received the silver from Page's hand: but before he departed to execute the commission, he sounded each coin on the table:—then, quite satisfied with the result of a process which was doubtless very necessary in such an establishment, he used all possible despatch to supply the amount of malt liquor ordered.

The health of the individual who had provided this treat was now proposed by the Kinchin-Grand in a speech stuffed so full of slang terms and flash expressions that had Mr. Page been at a Chinese banquet, with a Mandarin holding forth in his own language at the head of the table, the whole affair would have proved equally intelligible. However, the commercial traveller's health was drunk with uproarious glee; and almost immediately after this ceremony was performed, the Magsman entered the room.

The appearance of that formidable personage was the signal for fresh outbursts of rejoicing. The boys looked upon him as affording the brightest example that could possibly be offered to their contemplation,—a sort of thieves' cynosure, combining all the admirable qualities of Dick Turpin, Jack Sheppard, and other individuals noted in the Newgate calendar,—a hero in fine, the mere mention of whose name was sufficient to excite the fires of emulation in every breast. On the other hand, the girls surveyed him with profound deference and respect; and had King George III entered the place at that moment, the young prostitutes would not have thought half so much of the company of that monarch as of the presence of one whose marvellous deeds were calculated, if recorded in print, to invest the annals of crime with the interest of romance.

The Magsman shook hands with the Kinchin-Grand and Shickster Sal, and then bestowed the same mark of condescension upon Page. He likewise dispensed a few shillings in regaling the juvenile horde; and, having apologised for leaving the delectable company in such haste, he took his departure with the commercial traveller.

"Well—what do you think of that scene?" said the Magsman to his companion, when they had gained the street, along which they proceeded in the direction of Cripplegate.

"I could not have believed that such places existed in the heart of a city which boasts its wealth, its civilisation, and its philanthropy," answered Page, speaking with an emphasis congenial to his feelings.

"Ah! there are more extraordinary things than that to be seen in London, I can assure you," returned the Magsman; "and may be you'll become acquainted with them some day or another. Lord! what a tale I could tell if I was examined before a Committee of the House of Commons, as they call it! Talk of a man being a Prime Minister who knows nothing—positively nothing—of the misery, poverty, and wretchedness which the working-classes endure: it is ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, indeed!" repeated Page.

At this moment they had reached the end of the lane which joins Fore Street; and as there was a hackney coach blocking up the way, Page stepped behind the Magsman to let him proceed first, as only one person could pass by at a time. But just as Page was picking his way between the vehicle and the buildings on his right, the Magsman turned suddenly back—seized him violently round the waist with both arms—and hurled him completely into the hackney-coach, the door of which was wide open at the moment. A man and a woman inside the vehicle, caught the commercial traveller as he was thus tossed in upon them; and while a gag was slipped into his mouth by one of these individuals, his eyes were blindfolded by the other.

The Magsman instantly leapt in, after the performance of this feat; and the hackney-coach drove rapidly away.

Page now heard the windows drawn up; and almost at the same time, the Magsman's voice sounded in his ears, saying, "We don't want to suffocate you, old fellow: and so the gag shall be taken out of your mouth. But recollect, that if you venture to speak a word even too loud—much less attempt a cry—you're a dead man. Now then, Lizzy, let his clapper wag again."

The Gallows' Widow removed the gag in obedience to this command; and Page now breathed freely in one sense, though not in another—for an awful consternation was upon him, and death appeared to stare him in the face.

"You see, my ben-cull," resumed the Magsman, after a pause, and speaking in a cool, deliberate tone, "the fact is that you're caught in your own net. The tables are turned upon you—and you must now take the consequences."

"Will you murder me?" asked Page, with a hollow groan.

"Not such a fool as that," responded the Magsman. "Your carcase would not be even worth the price of dog's-meat for the same weight in horse-flesh: whereas you may manage to raise five hundred guineas for your ransom."

"Five hundred guineas!" ejaculated the miserable commercial traveller, now bitterly repenting his folly in entering into this enterprise against the formidable enemies who had not only baffled him but also got him completely in their power.

"Well, ain't it enough?" growled a voice, which Page immediately recognised to be that of the Big Beggarman.

The commercial traveller groaned again, but made no reply; and throwing himself back in the vehicle, he gave way to his melancholy reflections.

The Gallows' Widow, the Magsman, and the landlord of the Beggar's Staff now proceeded to chat familiarly amongst themselves; and the coach rolled rapidly along, the driver frequently whipping his horses to increase their speed.

Upwards of three quarters of an hour thus passed; and at length the vehicle stopped. Page was immediately compelled to alight: and he was conducted between the Magsman and the Big Beggarman along a place which he took to be a court or alley,—for the mere fact of being blindfolded sharpened his perception relative to the nature of the echoes raised by the trampling of feet and the sounds of voices.

"Hold your tongue, mind," said the Magsman as they thus proceeded onward: "or it will be the worse for you, depend upon it."

"The butt-end of a horse-pistol is a nasty thing coming across one's brains," added the Beggarman.

The commercial traveller remained silent accordingly; and in a few minutes he was led up two or

three steps into a house, the door of which had been previously opened in obedience to the summons of the Gallows' Widow, who had gone on in front for the purpose.

Along a boarded passage Page was now conducted—then down a flight of steep stone steps, at the bottom of which he heard the Gallows' Widow removing the bolts and chain of a door. This process caused a few moments' delay; and the instant the door swung round upon its grating hinges, a voice, apparently coming from the bowels of the earth, exclaimed, "Fiends! will you give me my liberty?"

"Not till the conditions are complied with, my bencull," responded the Magsman. "But we've brought you a companion, and you ought at least to thank us for that."

"Miscreants!" ejaculated the voice, in a tone of deep, concentrated rage.

At the same moment, the Big Beggarman pushed the commercial traveller forward into the cellar or dungeon, and the door was immediately closed with violence. Then there was the din caused by replacing the chain, and by shooting the massive bolts into their sockets; and that ominous noise was followed by the sound of retreating footsteps on the stairs.

Page remained standing motionless, breathless, stupified, until all was silent; then tearing off the bandage from his eyes—but finding himself in total darkness—he sank down upon the damp earth with an ejaculation of indescribable misery.

"Who are you, unhappy man, that have thus been brought hither to share with me the horrors of this den?" asked the voice which he had before heard.

"I am indeed an unhappy man!" cried Page, clutching his hair on each side of his head with his two hands, and tearing it with frantic violence.

"Not more unhappy than I," responded his companion, bitterly. "Oh, my God! when I reflect upon all the misfortunes which have fallen

upon my devoted head, I feel as if I were going mad—mad!"

"Then accident has brought together the two most unhappy beings in existence," said the commercial traveller. But let us know each other better. My name is Page, and I am, or was, in the service of Hodson and Morley, Wood Street."

"And my name is Sir Richard Stamford," was the rejoinder.

CHAPTER XI.

SIR RICHARD STAMFORD.

Mr. Page literally bounded from the damp floor of the dungeon as this name fell upon his ears: and with straining eyes he endeavoured to pierce through the intense darkness of the place in order to obtain a glimpse of the baronet's countenance. But the night that prevailed there was of that profound blackness which, like the Egyptian plague, could be almost felt!

"Sir Richard Stamford!" repeated the commercial traveller, in a tone of such mingled amazement and horror, that it startled the unhappy gentleman whose name had produced so unaccountable an effect.

"Yes, I am indeed the individual whom I proclaim myself to be," answered the baronet. "But is it possible that my misfortunes are known to you?"

"Misfortunes!" ejaculated the commercial traveller, with a cold shudder.

"Misfortunes of an unparalleled description," returned Sir Richard Stamford, in a tone of great bitterness. "But although I cannot see your countenance, there is something in your voice and manner which denotes mystery or misapprehension. Tell me, I conjure you, what you have heard concerning me—what the world knows or says regarding the terrible events at Stamford Manor—and what has become of those villains Ramsey and Martin?"

"You do indeed surprise me!" exclaimed Page. "But before we continue the discourse on those topics, permit me to inform you that my present deplorable incarceration here is all more or less owing to you."

"To me!" cried the baronet, his bewilderment increasing.

"Yes, to you!" answered Page, in an impetuous and irritated tone. "If I had not meddled in your affairs, I never should have encountered the miscreant who has locked me up in this accursed place. But it was all through meeting you the night before last at the George and Blue Boar in Holborn, and then chasing you in a hackney-coach till you disappeared in the Edgeware Road——"

"Is it possible that these wretches can have given me a madman as a companion?" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, in a voice too full of anguish to permit the slightest doubt as to his sincerity, or to allow the least suspicion that he was wilfully affecting not to understand the allusions and meanings of the commercial traveller.

"I see that we are playing at cross-purposes somehow or another," said Page: "but with a little patience we may soon get at the truth. In the first place, however, I can assure you that I am no lunatic—although it is very possible that I shall become one shortly, if my employers don't rescue me from this dreadful dungeon."

"You spoke of meeting me the night before last at a tavern in Holborn," observed Sir Richard Stamford, still hesitating to believe in the alleged sanity of his fellow-prisoner, but determined to put him to the test.

"To be sure," cried the commercial traveller. "And I made some civil remark to you: but you turned away as proud as Lucifer, scarcely deigning a reply."

"There is some strange misconception in all this," said the baronet: "for not only was I never in my life at the tavern which you named, but the night you allude to was passed by me in this wretched place."

"And yet you are Sir Richard Stamford?" exclaimed Page, with increasing bewilderment.

"I have already assured you I am that most unhappy and much injured individual," was the mournful response.

"When were you brought here, might I ask?" demanded the commercial traveller. "Let us reckon by dates and days—and then we shall come to the point. The terrible event of Aylesbury took place during the night of Monday the 4th of January."

"And it was immediately after those fatal occurrences that I was seized—thrust into a covered van—gagged—and brought hither," said the baronet. "As nearly as I can reckon, it must have been at about six o'clock in the morning of the 5th that I was plunged into this cell, where I have remained ever since."

"Nevertheless, it was on Tuesday evening, the 5th, that I saw you at the George and Blue Boar," exclaimed the commercial traveller. "I am sure I cannot be wrong," he continued, in a musing tone. "No—it was on the Tuesday evening I chased you as far as the Edgware Road—on Wednesday evening I went to the Beggar's Staff—and we may call this Thursday night for the sake of being intelligible, although it is by this time two o'clock on Friday morning."

"Then I can assure you once more that I had been for some hours an inmate of this loathsome place, when you imagine that we met in Holborn" said Sir Richard Stamford. "But may I inquire wherefore you chased any individual whom you supposed to be me, as far as the Edgware Road?"

"To speak candidly," replied Page, "I was induced to plunge headlong into that mad freak by the reward offered for your apprehension."

"Villain! how dare you make a jest of my misfortunes?" exclaimed the baronet, starting up in a state of terrible excitement, and feeling his way towards the commercial traveller.

"Keep off, sir!" cried the latter, retreating into a corner of the cellar. "I did not mean to irritate you—I only spoke the truth!"

"The truth!" repeated Sir Richard Stamford: then, as a sudden idea struck him, he said in a tone of acute anguish, "I begin to see it all! The miscreants Martin and Ramsey have vilified my name—perhaps accused me of deeds which it is maddening to contemplate! My good friend," continued the baronet, exerting all his strength to subdue the agonising emotions which raged within him, "pardon me for my warmth, and let us understand each other."

"That is precisely what I most desire," returned Page: "but I am so bewildered and confused that I know not how to separate and classify my ideas."

"Permit me to take upon myself the part of in-

terrogator," said the baronet. "On what ground has a reward been offered for my apprehension?"

"Shall I tell you?" said the commercial traveller, with some degree of hesitation.

"Yes—speak!" ejaculated Sir Richard. "I am now prepared to hear any calumny that may be alleged against me."

"You are accused of terrible crimes," continued Page.

"And those crimes," said the baronet, with forced composure,—"what are they?"

"Fraud—forgery murder—and arson," responded Page, enunciating the words slowly and with much hesitation.

"The miscreants!—the calumniators!" ejaculated Sir Richard Stamford; and the commercial traveller could hear that he dashed his hand violently against his brow.

There was then a long interval of profound silence in the dungeon.

At last this pause—so deep, so still—was broken by the baronet himself, whose voice was characterized by that unnatural steadiness, slowness, and yet partial thickness, which are the invariable evidence of powerfully concentrated emotions.

"You shall at once be made acquainted with my sad history," he began; "and it will then remain for you to decide the amount of commiseration which woes and wrongs so great as mine deserve. Moreover, it is probable that you will leave this awful place long before the day of my liberation shall come—for I can now form a tolerably accurate idea of the object my persecutors have in view in requiring of me certain conditions which I have hitherto peremptorily refused to fulfil, and to which I am now more determined than ever not to assent. Should you, therefore, regain your freedom, leaving me still a prisoner here, you will not abandon my cause—you will not fail to invoke the aid of justice in my behalf?"

"Assuredly not!" ejaculated the commercial traveller; and he prepared to listen with attention to the baronet's story.

"I am now in my thirty-seventh year," began Sir Richard; "and until within a few days ago, sorrow and I were almost perfect strangers to each other. 'Tis true that my mother died when I was sixteen—and that my father followed her to the tomb at about the period of my majority; but these were afflictions which occurred in the ordinary course of nature, and could scarcely be termed subjects for repining. On the day that I became twenty-one, I found myself in possession of an estate producing seven thousand a-year; and, leaving it in the charge of a trustworthy individual, I set out upon a long continental tour. I had already visited France, during my minority—and my taste for travelling was encouraged by the remembrance of the six or eight agreeable months I had passed at that period in Paris. On this second occasion I resolved to extend my tour through Germany into Italy; and the design was carried into effect. My wanderings were prolonged even beyond my original intention; and five years elapsed ere I again set foot in England. During that interval my property had been much improved through the experience, integrity, and agricultural knowledge of my faithful agent: the tenantry were all prosperous, happy, and contented;—and the welcome that greeted me on my arrival at Stamford Manor was of the warmest and most cordial description. All the farmers and peasantry upon the estate were assembled, with their families, to receive me;—and I well remember how blithe and joyous was the ball which took place on the lawn in the evening. Pardon me if I have paused to dwell upon an incident apparently so trivial in contrast with the sad events that have recently occurred; but even from the depth of this dungeon, a retrospect over those sunny days of my existence is fraught with a consolatory influence."

The baronet ceased for a few minutes—and Page fancied that the sound of a half-stifled sob stole upon his ear through the intense darkness.

"I was now upwards of six-and-twenty," resumed Sir Richard Stamford "and it was natural that I should think of marriage. My appetite for travelling was satiated; and I longed to settle down into the enjoyment of a sweet domesticity, in the midst of my tenants. Chance threw me in the way of a widow and her beautiful daughter, who lived in great seclusion at Aylesbury: for their circumstances were extremely limited. It were impossible to conceive a lady more amiable than Mrs. Sedley—or a being more enchantingly lovely than Eleanor. That affection may spring up in the heart at first sight, I am well convinced: because from the first moment that I beheld Eleanor Sedley, I loved her. In a short time my passion amounted to a worship—an adoration: it was rather the enthusiasm which is experienced by the youth of eighteen, than the sentiment which ordinarily animates a man of twenty-six. And I was beloved in return—yes, b loved as ardently and as well; and the widow was rejoiced at the bright prospects which now developed themselves on behalf of her darling daughter. We were married after a comparatively short courtship; and Mrs. Sedley took up her residence with us at the Manor, on our return from the honeymoon-visit to a relative of mine in Devonshire. A few years passed away in happiness so unalloyed—so complete, that had I reflected at all I might have felt assured, judging from the mutability of human affairs, that this elysian state was too glorious to last for ever. But I had not a care for the present nor a dread for the future and although our union was unblessed by offspring, this circumstance marred not the felicity which was enjoyed by Eleanor and myself. At length a sorrow came in the form of the sudden and alarming illness of Mrs. Sedley; and in spite of all the skill and attention which medical aid could devote or gold procure, she sank into the tomb. My Eleanor was for a long time inconsolable: but at length her grief gave way to resignation—and then a short tour into Devonshire succeeded in restoring her to her wonted spirits."

Again the baronet paused for a few minutes, at the expiration of which he resumed his narrative in the following words:—

"It was on our return to the Manor, after this brief absence of a few weeks, that we formed the acquaintance of one whose name I can scarcely mention without a feeling of mingled horror and indignation, so intense that it almost suffocates me. I allude to Philip Ramsey, who had only a short time before become a partner in Mr. Martin's bank. He was then a young man of about four-and-twenty with a handsome person, a prepossessing address, and highly accomplished; and he speedily became

a frequent visitor at the Manor. I insensibly experienced a great regard for him: his good temper, unvarying gaiety, affability, and extensive knowledge, rendered him a welcome guest. Mr. Martin, who was an elderly man, had been intimate with my parents, and was considered by me as one of my best friends; and thus you will not be surprised to learn that when the two partners mooted certain proposals to me of a financial nature, I listened with much attention and interest. In a word, they represented the amount of benefit which a liberal banking and loan system would confer upon the farmers of the surrounding districts,—by saving that class of the industrious population from the rapacity of money-lenders, and from the necessity of forcing sales of their grain at large sacrifices. I cordially approved of the scheme; and the partners, having succeeded in making this favourable impression upon me, began to throw out hints relative to their want of adequate capital to carry out these philanthropic views. The bait took—and I ingenuously assured them that such an obstacle should not be allowed to stand in their way, as I would cheerfully advance any reasonable sum that they might require. I was rich, and had the means,—too rich and too well contented with the fortune I enjoyed, to be influenced by any selfish motives. It was therefore animated only with the desire to prove useful to a most deserving class, that I suffered myself to be drawn into a partnership with Martin and Ramsey. This connexion rendered us more intimate, if possible, than ever; and Ramsey in particular scarcely ever suffered an evening to elapse without calling at the Manor. Shortly after the settlement of those financial matters, the death of my relative in Devonshire called me into that county; and my wife being somewhat indisposed at the time, could not accompany me. I was absent for nearly two months; and on my return, Eleanor welcomed me with an enthusiasm which at the time filled my heart with joy, but which I now look back upon as the affectation of a vile duplicity. I learnt that Mr. Ramsey had been constant in his visits during my absence: and I remember that I thanked him with friendly warmth for the attentions he had thus shown to my beloved Eleanor. Insensate fool that I was! how could I have been so blind? My return was seized upon by my wife as an excuse for giving a grand festival; and I soon began to perceive that a fondness for company and pleasure was gaining a rapid ascendancy over her. She grew expensive in her dress—her jewellery—her equipage—and her entertainments; and the once quiet and tranquil Manor was in course of time transformed into a scene of incessant gaiety. I never remonstrated with Eleanor as long as her proceedings involved no expenditure that exceeded our income; for I loved her too devotedly—too tenderly to thwart her in anything that afforded her gratification. Neither did the slightest sentiment of jealousy animate me when I saw that Ramsey was constantly by her side,—ever her partner in the dance, her companion in equestrian excursions, and her right-hand neighbour at the dinner-table. But if I ever reflected at all upon the subject, I saw nothing improper in such assiduity on the part of a young man whom many circumstances placed almost on the footing of a brother to us both. Thus three or four years passed away; and I became so accustomed to the gay—I might even call it dissipated life which we led, that pleasure grew as necessary to me as if I had plunged into it voluntarily, instead of being drawn into the vortex by the example of a wife whom I adored. In the meantime, Martin was constantly assuring me that the bank was in a highly prosperous condition; and, as I never interfered with him in the management of the business, I had not the slightest suspicion that the affairs were otherwise than as he represented them. Indeed, the luxurious mode of life maintained by himself and Ramsey appeared to confirm the statements thus made to me; as it never struck me they were capable of living beyond the incomes produced by their legitimate share of the profits. But a storm—a fearful storm was brewing over me,—ready to burst with an appalling violence."

Sir Richard Stamford again ceased speaking for a short period; and Page began to imagine that the dreadful charges subsisting against the baronet would be disposed of in such a manner as to shift the burthen of guilt entirely from his shoulders to those of others.

"Yes—the dark clouds were gathering rapidly," resumed Sir Richard; "and I beheld them not—suspected them not! Oh! how terrible is the fury of that tempest which explodes so suddenly upon a dead calm, and without even the previous warning of a single drop of rain! Thus was it in my unfortunate case; and I must now summon all my courage—all my composure—all my self-command to aid me in approaching the fearful incidents of Monday last. I rose on that day with a heart as light and free from care as if there were no such thing as adversity in the world—as if no storm ever swept over the unruffled ocean of life! Eleanor was gay, tender, and affectionate as usual,—nay, more so—for she had an object in view! My God—when I think of all that duplicity into whose depths my mental perception can now plunge as if it were a crystal stream transparent to its pebbly bed! While we were seated at breakfast, she turned the conversation upon Lady Wentworth's beautiful pair of grey ponies, which her husband Sir William had purchased for her last week; and by degrees did my syren-wife lead me on till I promised that she should be enabled to vie with—if not eclipse her friend in the graceful attractions of her equipage. Then Eleanor told me how Mr. Ramsey had casually mentioned to her that a similar pair of ponies were to be procured at a certain dealer's in Aylesbury; and after breakfast I set out for town with the view of procuring them at any price. For never had Eleanor seemed more seductively beautiful—never more charmingly captivating than on this occasion. O Woman—daughter of Eve!—why art thou ever loveliest when thine heart is most filled with guile?"

And Page knew by the sounds which he heard that the baronet was wringing his hands bitterly—bitterly, as he uttered those last words in a tone of penetrating anguish.

"Unsuspicious, frank, and confiding, I went forth to purchase for my wife the objects of her phantasy," continued the baronet, growing more excited as his narrative approached its catastrophe; "and in this disposition I rode into Aylesbury, followed as usual by my groom. Having put up my horse at the livery stables, and dispensing with the attendance of the servant for a couple of hours, I called at the bank

to procure a new cheque-book and there I learnt that Mr. Martin had departed on the preceding evening for London on pressing business. It struck me at the moment that Ramsey seemed pale and even confused as he gave me this information: but I attributed his appearance and manner to the bustle of business, and took my leave. I thence proceeded to the horse-dealer's, and after some little bargaining purchased the ponies, for the price of which I at once wrote a cheque upon the bank. Having thus fulfilled the principal object of my visit to Aylesbury on that occasion, I was returning to the livery-stables where I had left my horse, when I recollected that my gold watch-chain was broken; and as it had been in my possession some years, and was completely out of fashion, I resolved to treat myself to a new one. I accordingly entered the jeweller's shop at which we were accustomed to deal, and made a selection of a new chain. My invariable custom had been to pay ready money to all tradesmen save those with whom it was convenient to have running accounts for the domestic purposes of the Manor; and I accordingly wrote a cheque for the amount of the chain. But as I handed it to the jeweller, I saw that he fidgetted and seemed embarrassed, as if wishing to say something to which he was nevertheless afraid to give utterance; and I began to question him. Then with many apologies for troubling me—many excuses for mentioning so delicate a subject—and many expressions of hope that he should not lose mine or her ladyship's custom, he observed that having a very large sum to pay in the course of the month, he should feel infinitely obliged if I would settle the account which had been running for the last three years! I was astounded—stupified. What could the man mean? Whenever Eleanor had fancied any new article of jewellery, I had invariably given her the money to purchase it: how, then, could there be a bill owing? An explanation took place; and, with indescribable feelings of sorrow and amazement, did I learn that Lady Stamford was indebted to the jeweller in the amount of eight hundred pounds! I endeavoured to master my feelings as well as I was able, so as not to suffer the shopkeeper to perceive that my wife had grossly deluded me; and when he opened his books to show me the statement which afforded such terrible evidence of Eleanor's extravagance, I felt sick at heart on discovering further proofs of her duplicity. For on examining the items, I found that articles which she had represented to me as having cost twenty guineas were in reality a hundred; and so on throughout the entire category. Still, however, veiling the intense anguish which racked me, I gave a cheque for the amount due, and took my departure. As I was proceeding towards the livery-stables, wrapped up in the most painful meditations, I met the horse-dealer of whom I had purchased the ponies. His countenance had in it something so ominous as he accosted me, that I was struck by his aspect; and no tongue can describe my dismay when he somewhat rudely informed me that my cheque had been dishonoured at the bank. Assuring him that there must be some egregious mistake, and bidding him return home and wait for me, I hurried to the bank, where I questioned the cashier, Mr. Ramsey being out at the time. I then learnt enough to convince me that the affairs of the establishment had long been in a most disordered state, and that they had now reached a point when insolvency was inevitable. With a suffocating sensation in the throat and a pressure upon the brain, I went into the private office and commenced an examination of the books. Little accustomed as I was to accounts, yet heaven knows that it was far from a difficult matter to perceive even through that multitude of figures the utter ruin of the establishment. For two hours did I pore over those books until my head swam round—my brain reeled—and my senses appeared to be deserting me. I waited for Ramsey—still he came not; and I at length took my departure. It was now five o'clock in the evening—and I felt so thoroughly wretched that I experienced a repugnance to return home. How could I reproach Eleanor for her extravagances which a comparatively small sum would remedy—when my imprudence in rushing headlong into that fatal partnership had involved us in ruin? I was demented—and feeling that I required to be alone in order to reason with myself, I entered a tavern and ordered dinner merely for the sake of having a private room for an hour or two. There I remained until nine o'clock—and heaven only can tell what myriads of agonising, despairing thoughts swept through my brain during that interval!"

There was another pause, at which Page was almost wildly impatient, though he said nothing: but the interest and curiosity now awakened within him, were intense even to poignancy.

"Oh! you can well believe that my reflections were of no pleasurable description!" exclaimed the baronet, at length breaking a prolonged interval of silence. "But I could have borne that ruin in which the villany of my partners involved me—yes, I could have borne *that* cheerfully—had it not been for the crushing discoveries I had made respecting my wife? And as I meditated upon the duplicity of her conduct, suspicions of another nature began to steal into my mind,—at first gradually, faintly, and imperceptibly, like the breaking of the dawn,—then with a gleaming more intense, lighting up as it were all the unfathomable depths of my own soul and bringing forth ideas which seemed to have always had a latent and slumbering though unknown existence there,—and then rushing in upon my appalled imagination with a vividness that struck me with dismay. A thousand little circumstances suddenly appeared to spring to life in my memory—all combining to strengthen those horrible suspicions, and rivet the conviction that it was not alone in her expenditure that Eleanor had deceived me! Yes—yes—I saw it all: she was faithless to me—and Ramsey was her paramour! My tongue felt like a flaming coal—Vesuvius seemed glowing in my brain—the Maelstroom raging in my heart. I rose from my seat—staggering against the wall for support; and there I sustained myself for a few minutes, literally unable to move. And now you may say it was providential, or that it was mere matter of chance,—but it is nevertheless a fact that the little incident of thus leaning against the wall was the cause of my obtaining a deeper insight into the villany of my partners. For I heard voices in the adjoining room—and, as the partition was thin, I could not help catching what was said. Judge of my feelings when I found that the occupants of the next apartment were Martin and Ramsey! Yes—I knew their voices in a moment;—and now I listened in breathless suspense. Martin was speaking at the time; and I heard him explain to Ramsey how *the forgeries had been so skilfully executed that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in selling out the stock at the Bank of*

England! The wretch, then, had been to London on his iniquitous business, and had only just returned. And Ramsey was laughing at the accounts he gave of his success; and they drank to each other's health—for they had been dining together. I was riveted to the spot: my ear was nailed to the wall;—and now Ramsey began to tell his partner in fraud how he had been that afternoon to the Manor while he knew that I was in Aylesbury,—how he had seen Lady Stamford and revealed to her the ruin which had assailed the bank,—how he and Martin had taken good care of themselves,—and how they had hit upon a certain plan for disposing of *me*—her husband—to which she had finally consented, though with some hesitation. What this plan was, did not appear; but I heard enough to convince me that Martin had made all the arrangements when in London to carry it into execution. The wretches! did they intend to murder me? My blood boiled as if a lava-stream were circulating in my veins: but still I listened. Martin now spoke; and it appeared that he had succeeded in finding out in London a certain Joseph Warren, nicknamed the Magsman, who had cheerfully undertaken for a heavy bribe the business which they had in hand regarding *me*! Ramsey asked Martin if he were sure that this Warren would be punctual—and the reply was in the affirmative. They then spoke of Warren in connexion with some former transaction relative to spurious coin; and Martin reminded Ramsey how well the man had behaved in that instance. I know not how it was that I restrained the indignation and the fury which were boiling within me as all this complication of atrocity was developed: but I suppose it was that I desired to remain and hear the two miscreants to the end. And perhaps I was the more completely riveted to the spot inasmuch as I sought to glean the nature of the dark and mysterious project that they had devised relative to myself. But presently the seducer of my wife—the villain Ramsey—began to speak of her in such light, loose, and ribald terms that I felt maddened as if drops of molten lead were falling upon my brain;—and when, no longer able to restrain myself, I was about to rush from the room and burst into the presence of the two men, a dizziness came over me and I sank senseless upon a chair."

Here the baronet paused again; and moanings of unutterable anguish escaped him.

"By heaven!" cried Page, "if I can only get out of this place, I will hunt those two scoundrels into Newgate before I have done with them! But pray proceed, Sir Richard—I am dying to hear the rest."

"And the remainder is terrible!" exclaimed the unfortunate baronet, with the emphasis of a poignant mental agony "I told you how I sank down in a swoon," he continued, endeavouring to master his emotions: "when I awoke from that senseless state, my watch informed me that nearly half-an-hour must have elapsed while I remained thus unconscious of all that was passing. I listened again at the partition wall: but the voices had ceased—all was silent. The villains had evidently retired. How was I to act? I was bewildered—stunned—stupified. Should I return home, and wreak my vengeance upon my wife? No—I could not harm her, guilty though she were; for her beautiful image floated with supplicating eyes before me! But I felt that to forgive her were impossible. And then those two miscreants—how was I to act towards *them*? Oh! it was easy to decide that point: I was a magistrate, and could myself issue warrants for their apprehension. This I resolved to do in the morning—for I was too heart-sick, too much exhausted with mental anguish, and too deeply overwhelmed with ineffable woe, to take any deliberate step that night. It was twelve o'clock when I reached the Manor; and the servant who opened the door to admit me into the house, stated that Mr. Ramsey had been waiting for the last two hours to see me. An unnatural composure took possession of me: I cannot account for it—but such was the fact;—and I resolved to hear all that my villanous partner might have to say before I proclaimed how much I knew. I entered the dining-room, where my wife was seated on one side of the supper-table and Ramsey on the other. I threw myself upon a chair with no affected exhaustion, but a real weariness alike of mind and body; and Lady Stamford inquired what had detained me at Aylesbury so long. I observed that there was a subdued anxiety and a tremulousness in her voice, and when I endeavoured to speak, my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. Ramsey remarked upon the loveliness of the night, which was of frosty clearness and moonlit; and he asked me to walk out with him to the shrubbery, as he wished to converse with me upon matters of great importance. It flashed to my mind all in a moment that he sought to inveigle me into some snare—perhaps to put into execution the mysterious scheme against me at which he and Martin had so darkly hinted;—and my blood, an instant before so sluggish, began to circulate like thrilling electricity in my veins. Starting from my seat, I poured forth the most bitter invectives alike against Ramsey and Lady Stamford. Did my life depend upon it I could not now recapitulate all that I then said: but I recollect that in a few hasty and cutting words I revealed enough to convince the guilty pair that everything was discovered. With incredible rapidity I must have glanced at the scene at the jeweller's—the dishonoured cheque—the examination of the bank-books—and the conversation which I had overheard at the inn. Ramsey sate stupified upon his chair: my wife became distracted—throwing herself at my feet—confessing all and everything of which I accused her—and imploring my mercy and my pardon. The scene was terrible: my eyes must have flashed fire—my features must have been convulsed with rage. Sensations of deep and burning hatred filled my soul—and my brain was in a ferment. But still my wife knelt before me, with upturned eyes and clasped hands—and her penetrating, agonising voice, rendered wild with despair, continued to beseech my forgiveness. Oh! even now that voice rings through my head,—and the sound will never cease to vibrate there—no, not when old age shall have made my ears impervious—if I live so long! Suddenly I spurned her from me—and she fell back: but in the next moment she started up with a wild and piercing cry, and seizing a sharp fruit-knife that lay too ready at hand, plunged it with the energetic violence of despair into her own bosom. Both Ramsey and myself rushed forward at the same instant to arrest the hand which wielded the fatal weapon

that flashed across our eyes in the lamp-light; but we were too late—the wretched woman's movement was as rapid as if under the influence of a sudden shock of galvanism—and the blow was dealt with the vivid speed of the lightning. Oh! my God—my God! what awful feelings took possession of me when I beheld that beauteous being weltering in her gore at my feet! Forgotten was her guilt, as if guilty she had never been; and I remembered only that she was lovely and beloved!"

The baronet ceased speaking, but burst forth into agonising lamentations, which sounded dreadful to the ears of the commercial traveller through the deep darkness. At any time and under any circumstances it is a sad and mournful thing for one man to hear another sobbing as if his heart would break: but when those passionate expressions of an ineffable woe acquire a tomb-like and hollow intonation from the caverned echoes of a dungeon—and when they burthen an atmosphere as black as the blackest night, the effect is solemnly and mysteriously appalling.

Page crept up to the side of his wretched companion—and, taking his hand, endeavoured to console him: but many minutes elapsed ere Sir Richard Stamford could so far recover himself as to bring his strange and terribly romantic narrative to a conclusion.

"Yes," he resumed, in a low, deep, and profoundly mournful tone: "at that moment when I beheld her lying dead before my eyes, I would have given words to recall her back to life. And I remember that suddenly starting from the stupefaction into which the frightful tragedy had plunged me, I felt a panic-terror come over me—an appalling dread as if I myself had murdered her! I also recollect that rushing wildly away from the scene of horror, I threw up the window opening on the lawn, and darted madly forth into the fresh air that the midnight breeze might cool my burning brain. As if demented—or possessed of an evil spirit that was raging within me—I ran frantically on until I reached the park; and then suddenly stopping and turning round—I know not under what strange influence—I beheld flames gushing forth from the windows of the dining-room. Resuming the wild and unatural speed that had previously hurried me away from the Manor, I flew back towards the burning pile: but scarcely had I emerged from the park and entered the shrubbery, when three or four men sprang upon me from the dark shade of the evergreens—and I was overpowered in an instant. The wretches bore me away to the adjacent road—thrust me into a covered cart that was waiting there—and gagged me to prevent my voice from alarming the domestics and tenants whose forms I had seen moving rapidly about the mansion, in the terrific light of the conflagration. The vehicle rolled rapidly away pursuing the main road towards London; and having changed the horse twice at lonely wayside public-houses, it entered the metropolis just as the clocks were striking five in the morning. I was then blindfolded, doubtless to prevent me from even forming a conjecture as to the direction which was now taken;—but I could judge by a few instructions which the leader of the party gave the driver from time to time, that the van was purposely pursuing a circuitous route. Finally, it was about six o'clock, as I have already informed you, when I was removed from the vehicle and thrust into this cell. Since that moment I have been enabled to calculate the lapse of time by the regularity with which the wretches bring me my sorry meals. But solitude—darkness—the terrific nature of my thoughts—a poignant sense of the tremendous injuries I have sustained at the hands of those whom I never injured—and the incessant contemplation of the wrongs that have been heaped upon me by persons whom I never wronged,—all this would have driven me mad—mad—had not your presence here this night given me a companion to whose ears I could unburthen my pent-up, suffocating misery! Oh! the malignant fiends—what do they require of me? That I should sign some paper with the contents of which I am not to be made acquainted—and that I shall consent to expatriate myself for ever to the American Continent, where a handsome pecuniary allowance will be made me. These are the terms on which my freedom can be obtained—these are the conditions which are proposed to me every time my meals are brought. Vainly have I questioned the man who is thus appointed to attend upon me,—vainly have I questioned him, I say, upon many points which so nearly regard me! He is speechless save in respect to a constant reiteration of those terms to which I cannot accede. But now, alas! from your lips I learn that my fame is blackened—that my reputation is assailed by the seducer of my poor wife and his equally vile partner in iniquity. Oh, to escape—to escape from this dungeon, and invoke the justice of the tribunals to decide between *them* and *me!*"

"And it will be no difficult matter to prove your innocence," said Page: "for the forgeries at the Bank of England can doubtless be traced to Mr. Martin—the cashier at your late establishment in Aylesbury can give sufficient testimony to clear you of any complicity in the misappropriation of the funds—and the fact of your incarceration here will show how urgent were the reasons that have induced your partners thus to dispose of you. The only points—and they are, after all, the most serious——"

"Speak, my friend—speak candidly," exclaimed the baronet, perceiving that the commercial traveller hesitated.

"I was alluding, Sir Richard, to the—the—death of Lady Stamford and the burning of the Manor," continued Page. "But I might as well inform you of a fact which I read in the newspapers, and which cannot possibly be known to you,—and this is, that the flames were speedily extinguished without having done much injury——"

"And the corpse of her whom I deplore in spite of her deep guilt——was *that* discovered?" asked the baronet in a low and tremulous tone.

"The flames had not reached it," replied the commercial traveller; "and it was discovered on the carpet, just as it must have fallen at first—with the fatal weapon still in the bosom. A Coroner's Inquest was to have been held yesterday—but I of course am ignorant of the result."

"Surgical evidence may perhaps prove the mortal blow to have been inflicted by the hand of suicide and not by that of a murderer," observed Sir Richard.

"Let us hope for the best!" exclaimed Page.

"Amen!" returned the baronet, fervently.

A long silence then ensued in the dungeon.

CHAPTER XII.

THE APPOINTMENT.

It is necessary to inform the reader who may be unacquainted with London, that St. James's Square is immediately behind Pall Mall West, and that the backs of the houses in the former are contiguous with the backs of those in the latter.

The dwelling of Mrs. Brace, the celebrated milliner, was in Pall Mall: but she likewise tenanted the house immediately behind it, and the front of which accordingly looked into St. James's Square. The one in Pall Mall had the shop, show-rooms, and toilette-chambers usual in a large and fashionable millinery establishment: the other, in the Square, had all the appearance of a handsome private residence.

Between these two houses was a means of communication; and as Mrs. Brace's abode was a place of assignation for the voluptuaries and demireps of the West End, nothing could possibly be more convenient for the purpose—the lady entering by the shop in Pall Mall, and the gentleman by the door in St. James's Square.

Mrs. Brace was now a lady of about forty years of age; and though her charms had expanded into a maturity even more voluptuous than the fulness of *embonpoint*, she nevertheless might still be pronounced a very fine woman. Her features were masculine, large, and expressive of a sensual disposition; but their outline was handsome—and a splendid set of well-preserved teeth, a fine pair of dark eyes, and black hair which time had left unmarred by a single streak of grey, gave her a certain air of beauty which failed not to find admirers.

She was always dressed with elegance—sometimes with splendour also; but even in the magnificence of her apparel, good taste was invariably recognised. Nothing could be more charming than the coquettish morning cap, with flowing ribands, in which she appeared at the breakfast table; nothing more graceful than the wrapper which she wore *en deshabille* until about eleven in the forenoon. At that hour she would retire to her chamber, whence in the course of ten minutes she emerged in a morning-gown of the newest pattern; and her morocco slippers were exchanged for well-fitting shoes—for Mrs. Brace was justly proud of a nicely shaped foot and ankle. But it was about three in the afternoon that this lady might be seen in the perfection of her toilette. If it were summer time, she would appear in a muslin dress of the most exquisite material, or perhaps in a light silk: but whichever it were, be well assured that its make and style were faultless. In winter she would wear either the richest satin or the most glossy velvet; and as her complexion was good—enhanced, perhaps, a little by means of cosmetics—the dark hues of these dresses set her off to the greatest advantage. Instead of bedizening herself with a profusion of jewellery, she displayed but little about her person: nevertheless, the ear-pendents, the chain, and the one ring which she might wear in addition to the wedding-ring, were certain to be chaste, elegant, and costly.

Then her manners were so fascinating—obliging and affable, without sycophancy—polite and respectful, without the slightest taint of cringing servility. All the young ladies in her establishment partook of their meals at a large table where she presided; and the honours were done by her with as winning a courtesy and as strict a propriety as if she were entertaining a number of select guests instead of her own work-girls. And a bevy of beauteous creatures were they—upwards of a dozen in number, and forming a combination of charms as well as displaying a variety of loveliness enchanting to behold. But, alas! every one of these captivating beings had been sacrificed in her turn to some stripling of the aristocracy or hoary voluptuary whose gold was deemed a sufficient price to purchase gems of female chastity.

For upwards of fifteen years had Mrs. Brace been established in Pall Mall: what she was previously to her appearance there, no one knew. She represented herself as a widow—and perhaps was, but she never volunteered any explanation relative to the calling, profession, or business of her late husband. She had set up in business with a large capital, and was not only able to pay her own way without an effort, but likewise to give one, two, or even three years' credit to her aristocratic customers. No one, therefore, took any trouble to fathom her antecedents; and as her establishment was conducted with all the outward appearance of the strictest propriety, its real nature was known only to a very limited circle.

Precisely at six o'clock in the evening, Octavia Clarendon alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of Mrs. Brace's shop in Pall Mall; and on entering, she was immediately accosted by that lady herself, who had no trouble in recognising the lovely creature whose personal appearance had already been fully described to her.

"Be so kind as to walk this way, Miss," said Mrs. Brace, with such a winning smile and such a pleasing manner that Octavia instantly recovered from the embarrassment into which she had been thrown on finding herself in a large shop, splendidly fitted up, and filled with beautiful girls whose brilliant eyes were all simultaneously raised towards her.

Miss Clarendon followed the amiable and handsome lady up a magnificent staircase, into a small but elegantly furnished room; and the moment she crossed the threshold, Mr. Harley, who was already there, came forward to receive her.

The door closed behind Octavia, Mrs. Brace gliding noiselessly out as she drew it after her;—and the young maiden was now alone with her lover.

"How can I sufficiently thank you, charming girl, for proving thus mindful of your promise?" exclaimed Harley, leading her to a sofa, and placing himself by her side. "Oh! I was fearful that you would disappoint me—I trembled lest something might occur to retain you at home!"

"Had I obeyed the dictates of prudence, I should not have come," responded Octavia, casting down her eyes and blushing deeply; "but——"

"But inclination prompted you, dearest girl," added Mr. Harley, perceiving that she stopped short with increasing embarrassment. "Yes—tell me the truth—confess that you were not altogether displeased at the idea of seeing me again——"

"Were it otherwise than as you wish me to say I should not be here now," observed Octavia: then, as a sudden thought struck her, she glanced has-

tily around, and her looks settled with an expression of alarm upon her companion's countenance, as she exclaimed, "But wherefore has that lady who conducted me hither, left us?"

"Because she is discreet, my angel," responded Harley, regarding the beauteous maiden with eyes brimful of passion: "because she knows what love is, and how lovers like to be alone;—and because she is well aware that we have much—Oh! so much to say to each other! Be not alarmed, dearest Octavia—much less offended:—do you think that I would act otherwise than according to the dictates of that affection which I bear towards you, and which I revealed last evening?"

"No, George—no," murmured the maiden, yielding to the bland influence of his seductive tongue, and the melting harmony of his rich voice: "I have every confidence in you, George——"

"And my life's study shall be your happiness, my well-beloved!" exclaimed Harley, throwing his arm round her waist, and drawing her gently towards him.

He was attired in a most elegant and tasteful manner: his shirt-frill and ruffles were of the finest lace; his black pantaloons and silk stockings, fitting tight, and fashioned with the most artistic shapeliness, displayed the admirably though robust symmetry of his limbs; and his waistcoat set with the nicest precision. He appeared handsomer in Octavia's eyes than she had even fancied him to be, much as she had already admired him; and there was something so noble in his air, and at the same time so captivating in his manner, that while she felt as if she were in the presence of a superior, yet she was not overawed.

Nevertheless, she trembled like a dove, and her heart fluttered in her bosom like a bird in its cage, when Harley drew her towards him; but when he pressed his warm lips to her's, and their very looks appeared to mingle in the transfusion of a tender

ness which seemed to be the blending of their spirit, indescribable sensations of joy, and pleasure, and bliss came over her—and she suffered him gently to remove her bonnet and her thick winter-shawl.

Then he smoothed down her shining auburn hair, and toyed with her long glossy ringlets that framed her blushing cheeks and swept over her shoulders; and the maiden felt how delicious it was to love and be beloved!

"You told me that you had so much to say to me, George," she murmured, her words appearing to borrow a more liquid intonation from the moistness of the inviting red lips between which they passed.

"Yes, my angel," he replied, his own voice becoming more tender and seductively low: "I wished to make you comprehend how sincerely—how devotedly I love you! But now that we are together, my feelings are so intense that it seems as if no language were capable of explaining them. I am lost as it were in the contemplation of the boundlessness of my love, to which I can no more assign a limit than even the wisest philosopher can form an idea of infinite space or eternity. For my love is as vast as space and as enduring as time itself; and I know not how to describe it otherwise. Tell me, dearest,—have you ever, when gazing at night up into the vault of heaven, studded with stars,—have you ever fancied that your soul expands with the greatness of that empyrean space which it contemplates?—and then, after striving to penetrate in imagination into the mysteries which lie beyond, have you felt your spirit return as it were to its clay, wing-weary—humbled—and dissatisfied? If such have ever been your sensations, you can conceive how vain it is for me to seek to measure the illimitable love which I bear you—how useless to calculate its immensity—and how depressed becomes my soul when I cannot find words to shape the ideas which I would fain convey to your comprehension."

Octavia hung with rapture and delight upon every syllable that fell, in such soft and melting harmony, from the lips of her lover; and so lost was she in the dream-like voluptuousness that enveloped her as with a halo—so completely did she abandon herself to the heavenly vision that seemed to have stolen over her senses—that she observed not the strange light which burnt in Harley's eyes, as his devouring regards were fixed upon her. Then he bent his face down so that his cheeks reposed against her's; and then he fastened his lips to her's—inhaling all the fragrance of her breath.

By degrees he became bolder; and Octavia, awakening as it were from her dream of bliss, struggled to extricate herself from his embrace; but he wound his arms around her—he strained her to his breast—he murmured impassioned words, and vows, and protestations in her ear—and with kisses he stifled the remonstrances and the beseechings that rose to her lips.

But suddenly a strong sense of danger flashed in unto her mind,—aye, and therewith a feeling that all this was wrong—very wrong; so that whatsoever virtuous principle was innate in her woman's nature asserted its empire that very instant. The immediate consequence was, that recovering all her presence of mind, and casting off in a moment the voluptuous languor that had come over her, Octavia tore herself from his embrace, exclaiming, "O George! is this your love for me?—would you plunge me into the depths of shame and degradation?"

"Beautiful being!" cried Harley, seizing her hands and pressing them one after the other to his lips; "wherefore do you reproach me? Should not I rather ask you where is that love which you have suffered me to believe that your soul cherishes for me? Oh! give me a love that knows nothing save its own inclinations—that can obey no dictates save those of the heart which contains it—and that absorbs in its own intensity all worldly considerations, all social conventions, and all the cold repugnance of a miserable prudery!—give me such a love as this, my Octavia," exclaimed Harley, his countenance becoming absolutely splendid as he made this impassioned appeal to the maiden's feelings,—"give me such a love as this, my angel—and I will deserve it by a life devoted to you—by an existence surrendered altogether to the delightful duty of ensuring your happiness—and by the homage, the adoration, and the worship of my heart!"

And as he uttered these last words, he dropped her hands and extended his arms towards her.

"O George! what would you have me do?" she murmured, throwing herself upon his breast and raising her countenance to receive the fervid kisses which he imprinted upon her cheeks.

"I would have you become mine—wholly mine!" he answered, after a short pause: "I would have you receive me as your husband now—this very evening—that I may be assured of having won you so completely that I need fear no rival! For I am jealous, Octavia—Oh! if I have a fault, it is that I am jealous;—and until your father has returned and given his assent to our union—aye, even until our hands are joined at the altar—I shall never know an instant's peace. And it is because I love you so devotedly, my Octavia—because I adore you with such a full measure of worship—that I am jealous of you;—and if I beseech you to have compassion upon me, and give me every proof of love that woman *can* give—'tis only that I may console myself when away from you by the conviction that I have secured a treasure which no rival can take from me!"

"My God! what shall I do?" murmured Octavia, weeping with mingled delight and pain. "Oh! why demand such a proof of my affection, George? Can you not put faith in me?—can you not believe that I love you?"

"Forgive me, dearest, if I reiterate the tale of my jealousy," exclaimed Harley, straining the yielding maiden more closely to his breast: "but 'tis a weakness that I cannot conquer. Have pity upon me, then—have pity upon me!—torture me not with those racking anxities——"

"Have pity upon *me*, George!" cried Octavia, gliding from his arms and sinking at his feet—her hair, which had escaped from its confinement, flowing all dishevelled down her back; —"have pity upon me, I say—have pity upon me!"

And she extended her clasped hands towards him.

The voluptuary was for an instant chagrined with disappointment;—and, supporting himself against the edge of a table, he bent upon her a look the momentary vexation of which changed into an expression of passionate admiration—so beautiful was she, thus kneeling at his feet, with her hair wantoning over her shoulders!

"Octavia, you love me not—you will drive me mad!" he suddenly exclaimed, playing with an infernal artifice upon the tender susceptibilities and yielding sensitiveness of the affectionate girl: and he turned abruptly away, as if about to leave the room.

"O heaven! he says that I love him not!" cried the maiden, wildly, as she sprang to her feet; and in another moment she was again clasped in his arms.

"Ah! then you do love me!—you *do* love me!" he exclaimed, in a tone half melting, half triumphant.

"Oh, yes, I love thee!—God knows that I love thee!" was the fervid response.

Alas! alas!—our soul is exceeding sorrowful for thee, Octavia Clarendon—for thou art now in the power of the seducer! Defoliated is the flower of thy chastity;—and thou knowest not to whom thou hast surrendered thyself!

But, if Mr. Harley possessed a diabolical skill in enacting the part of the betrayer of innocence, he was not the less expert in soothing the soul that was now stricken with remorse and in quieting the anguished alarms that succeeded the moments of pleasure. He who had ere now spoken of the poverty of language when used to convey ideas of a fervent love, found that it was rich in vows, protestations, and oaths calculated to solace the mind of the ruined girl. And how could she do otherwise than suffer herself to be thus consoled?—on what other reed could she lean save the promise of her lover?—was it for her to give way to despair, ere hope had ceased to exist? Oh! no—and Octavia, abandoning herself entirely to that confidence which her very position compelled her to place in her seducer, smiled upon him through her tears—and gave herself completely up to him—and shut out from her vision the world which she had as it were quitted, in order the more fully to enjoy the delights of that elysian sphere into which he had wafted her.

It was past ten o'clock when she quitted the milliner's establishment—alone: for Harley made her understand that the "respectability" of the house would be compromised if they were seen issuing forth together. But ere they separated, he had obtained from her a promise that she would meet him there again on the ensuing evening, provided her father did not return home in the interval; in which case he gave her the address of an hotel where he alleged that he was staying in London, and where she might write to him.

Heaven only knows what excuse Octavia made to her sister for her prolonged absence of several hours: certain however it is that the latter suspected nothing;—and as they retired to rest immediately after the guilty girl reached her home, the burning blushes that every other minute rose to her cheeks, likewise escaped the notice of the innocent Pauline.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DUNGEON.

The dungeon in which Sir Richard Stamford and the commercial traveller were confined, was in reality a large vaulted cellar. The walls and roof were of massive masonry: the floor consisted of the damp unpaved ground. A quantity of straw was spread in one corner to form the baronet's couch; and this had not been changed during the few days that he had been an inmate of the place.

Upon that sorry bed the prisoners snatched two or three hours' repose, after Sir Richard had told his lamentable tale;—they slept through sheer exhaustion—a sleep that was rather the prostration of all the physical and mental powers, than the slumber which has a refreshing influence with it and imparts new vigour alike to body and mind when the eyes open again.

Yes—they slept the heavy and leaden sleep which misery often knows;—and when they awoke again, it was not to the cheering beams of the morning sun—nor to the whispering of the breeze rustling through the defoliated boughs of winter,—but to the intense darkness of their cell, and to the din of the falling chain and receding bolts outside the door.

And that massive door swung round upon its hinges—and then the faintest, faintest gleaming of light, shed from the staircase, penetrated glimmeringly into the dungeon,—so partially and sickly however, that it enabled not the prisoners to catch a glimpse of each other's countenance, but merely showed them the form of a man at the entrance.

"Well, how d'ye like your companion, Sir Richard?" inquired the fellow, in a gruff voice and with a free and easy tone: but it was not the Magsman, as Page had fancied at the first moment when his eyes caught the dark outlines of the somewhat stout and burly figure.

"If I were to tell you that his society was agreeable to me," answered the baronet, bitterly, "you would remove him to another place; and if I were to declare that I prefer solitude you would leave him here in order to torment me."

"May be I should," observed the man, with a coarse and brutal chuckle. "But perhaps you'd like to know why we put him along with you at all? Well, I don't mind telling you, Sir Richard," continued the ruffian, after a brief pause, during which he found that his half-interrogative observation remained without reply. "The fact is that we wanted you to learn the real position in which you stand regarding affairs out of doors in general, and at Aylesbury in particular. It was very certain that if I had told you all *that*, you would not have believed me—you would have fancied that I was only making things look as black as the devil, on purpose to get you to accept the conditions proposed. But as Mr. Page is doubtless well acquainted with all that has occurred, and all that people now say of you—why, the chances are that he has not left you in the dark in that respect. Is it not so?"

"My companion has indeed given me a farther insight into the villanies of those who employ you to persecute me," said the baronet, in a mournful tone: then, with sudden excitement, he cried, "But can nothing move you to release me from this

dreadful place? My enemies pay you well, no doubt, to keep me here—but I will pay you better if you will let me go. I am not altogether friendless—I can give you a letter to a gentleman who will pay you a thousand pounds as the price of my freedom——"

"Come now—none of that nonsense with me!" interrupted the man, savagely: "I am not to be bribed. The only way in which you can obtain your liberty, is to sign the paper."

"Then I will *not* sign it!" ejaculated the baronet, with feverish energy.

"Just as you please, sir," remarked the fellow: "you will sing a different song before many days are over. Now, Mr. Page—are you awake yet?"

"A straw bed is not very provocative of slumber," responded the commercial traveller, mournfully. "But what do you require of me?"

"If you want to write a note to Hodson and Morley to ask them to ransom you, it may as well be done at once as to-morrow or next day. Five hundred guineas, you know—that is the price," exclaimed the man, with a renewal of his coarse and brutal chuckle.

"Five hundred pounds! they'll never pay it," said Page, in a voice of despair.

"You can but try them," returned the man. "Or perhaps you have some other friend——"

"Not one who will advance such a sum. However," continued the commercial traveller, "I cannot linger here all my life—that is very certain; and therefore I must make an effort. Hodson has got me into this scrape—and he ought to help me out of it."

"Ah! then old Hodson was at the bottom of the plant?" exclaimed the fellow.

"Well—since I have admitted it, there's no use attempting to deny it," returned Page. "But give me pen, ink, and paper, and a light, and I will soon pen a note to Hodson. It can do no harm, at all events."

"You can't write here—there's no table," said the man. "Come along with me for a few minutes—I'll bring you safe back again to the baronet, depend upon it."

Page accordingly issued from the dungeon, the door of which was immediately closed and bolted again; and the ruffian led the way up the stone stairs, into a back room plainly furnished. The commercial traveller threw a searching glance through the dingy window-panes of a small casement; but his looks encountered naught save the dirty walls of the buildings in the rear of the house; and he gleaned not the slightest fact indicative of the part of London where that house was situate. Not a familiar church-tower nor a well-known steeple, that might have served as an index of the locality, met his eyes: nothing save those dingy walls, with their miserable windows, whence hung a few rags to dry.

"You've no more notion where you are, old fellow, than if you'd been dropped out of the clouds," observed the man, who understood what was passing in the mind of Page; and the remark instantly attracted the looks of the commercial traveller towards the speaker, who was a great, stout, strong-built, ill-visaged ruffian, of middle age, and with an enormous wen upon the crown of his bald head.

"I must confess that I am entirely at fault," said Page, in answer to the man's observation.

"And I don't mean to enlighten you," was the gruff rejoinder. "Now, then—there's writing materials—and you'll please to put down on paper just what I'm going to tell you."

Page seated himself at the table, and intimated his readiness to begin; whereupon the ruffian, after some consideration at the beginning, and a long pause between the sentences, dictated the ensuing letter:—

"DEAR CHU,

"I have unfortunately fallen into a trap, and am in the custody of those whom I meant to ensnare. The tables were completely turned against me; and I am in a horrible dungeon, situated I have not the slightest idea where. The men who have thus made me their prisoner, mean to hold me fast until five hundred pounds are paid for my ransom. I write this to the dictation of one of them. What I therefore beg of you to do, is to enclose that sum, which must all be in gold, in a bag—label it with a paper bearing the initials J. H. P.—and leave it at the bar of the Beggar's Staff, Horsleydown. Within six hours after this is done, I shall have the honour of waiting upon you in Wood Street, to thank you in person for your kindness. Do not flatter yourself that Grumley or any one else will be able to find out where I am, and extricate me: nothing but your compliance with the above request will accomplish that object.

"Yours very obediently,

"*Mr. Hodson,* "J. H. PAGE.
"*Wood Street.*"

"That will do!" exclaimed the man, reading over the shoulder of the commercial traveller the letter which he himself had dictated—a process that he considered necessary in order to acquire the certainty that nothing more nor less than he had suggested was contained in the document. "I think that will induce the old merchant to come down handsomely, and, as there's honour amongst thieves," he added, with his disagreeable chuckle, "you shan't be kept in durance a minute longer than the time necessary to receive from the Beggars' Staff a message stating that the coin has been left there."

"I hope that the letter will prove effective," said Page, heaving a profound sigh as he rose from his seat.

At the same instant his eyes encountered a long, thick, and well-rusted file that lay upon a chest of drawers within reach of his hand; and it flashed to his mind that many a desperate escape from even a stronger prisonage than the cellar down stairs, had been accomplished by means of a far more inefficient implement than that old tool.

"You don't seem to be a bad sort of fellow in your way," observed the man; "and I think that a drop of something short would perhaps do you good."

Thus speaking, he turned towards a cupboard in a corner of the room; and at the same moment Page secured the file about his person.

The man produced a gin-bottle, and each partook of a dram. The commercial traveller was then directed to carry a couple of tin-pots full of coffee down to the cellar, the gaoler following him with two large slices of bread; and in a few moments the two prisoners were once more together in the dungeon, the door being again secured by bolts and chains.

For some time the baronet and Page continued to make their meal in profound silence: but when the latter had drained the last drop of his coffee and eaten the last mouthful of crust, he said in a low whispering tone, "Do you think it would be impossible to escape from this place?"

"Escape!" ejaculated Sir Richard, his veins tingling with the sensation produced by the bare idea.

"Hush! the very walls have ears!" returned the commercial traveller, seizing his companion violently by the arm: for they were seated close to each other upon the straw. "Listen—and do not interrupt me. I have written the letter to old Hodson, my employer—but I do not for a moment imagine that he will pay the money. At all events, he will take some time to consider the matter well—for he is one of those persons who never do anything in a hurry;—and in the interval I shall catch an incurable rheumatism, or die of grief in this infernal hole. It is therefore my intention to make a desperate effort to escape."

"But how?" demanded the baronet, encouraged by his companion's words, although he saw not as yet the least probability of carrying the project into execution. "The door is as solid as the masonry—the walls are hard as rock—and we have not even a nail nor the smallest piece of iron to work with."

"On the contrary, I have an excellent file which I secreted about my person just now," returned Page. "Here—take the implement in your hands and feel it."

"But the bolts and chain are outside the door—and, even if you attempt to file the iron hinges, the noise will be heard up-stairs," objected the baronet.

"We will have nothing to do with the door at all," said Page. "While I was outside the dungeon just now, I had my eyes about me, I can assure you. In the first place, I saw enough of the locality to convince me that this cellar is precisely the width of the house, which is a narrow one; and consequently, if there is any cellar adjoining, it must belong to another house. Granting, then, that there *is* a cellar on the other side of this wall against which we are leaning, we must manage to get into it—and perhaps the occupants of the next house will not prove hostile to us. At all events the risk is worth running; and this file will serve in a few hours to pick a hole through the wall large enough to allow us to pass into the adjoining place."

"Let us make the attempt, my good friend!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, joyfully. "We will work by turns with unrelaxing energy—and I will commence."

"No—let *me* begin," said the bustling commercial traveller, who felt almost happy in spite of his imprisoned condition. "By the way, the man never comes in with a light—does he?"

"Never," answered the baronet.

"That is just what I had calculated upon," said Page; and at the same moment he began to insert the pointed end of the solid file into the hard mortar of the cellar wall.

The commercial traveller was not strong: but he possessed that admixture of energy, expertness, and skill which sometimes serves a man better than mere physical power. His perseverance, when he was carried away by the excitement of any specific pursuit, was indomitable; and this spirit on his part now received a marvellous impulse from the anxiety which he felt to escape from that horrible dungeon and the small amount of reliance he placed in the willingness of Messrs. Hodson and Morley to assist him out of his dilemma. The consequence was that he worked away with a good will and a heartiness which astonished even himself; and although at the expiration of an hour, he had not even succeeded in loosening a single stone, still the mortar was removed all around one to the depth of an inch—and a beginning was thus effected in good earnest.

Sir Richard Stamford now took his turn; and, being a man of great physical strength, he soon made an impression upon the solid masonry. But every now and then it was necessary to stop for two or three minutes, in order to obtain the assurance that no one was listening outside the door: for the baronet, during his confinement in the dungeon, had frequently heard several male and female voices in the house, and therefore knew that there were many residents therein.

By about two o'clock in the afternoon the first stone was removed from its setting—and Page had the honour of this important achievement in the initiative of the task. But the labour was discontinued for a short space; inasmuch as according to such calculation of the lapse of time as the baronet was enabled to make, the presence of the gaoler might be shortly expected with the dinners. This event soon took place; and the prisoners were served with some coarse boiled meat, potatoes, and wretched table-beer. Half-an-hour was allowed them for the discussion of this meal—at the expiration of which interval the ruffian returned to the door of the cellar to take away the plates, drinking-mugs, and knives and forks.

As soon as the sounds of his retreating footsteps had died away, the work was recommenced with the file; and, as the first stone had been removed, the task grew comparatively easy. At length towards seven in the evening—according to Sir Richard's reckoning—an indentation had been effected to a sufficient depth to enable the prisoners to ascertain, by gently sounding the wall, that there was a hollow space on the other side. They therefore concluded that there was a cellar in that direction; and this belief gave them renewed energy and spirits to recommence their labours after the evening meal of coffee and bread had been served to them.

For four hours longer did they continue to work by turns—though not without grazing the skin off their hands against the asperities of the orifice which they were forming, and receiving frequent bruises on the knuckles by the slipping of the file: for it was by no means an easy task thus to toil on in the unrelieved darkness of that place.

At length the perforation was complete; and Page, thrusting his arm through the aperture, placed beyond all farther doubt the fact that there was a cellar on the other side of the wall. The removal of the last few stones, the displacement of which was necessary to render the hole large enough for the passage of a human form, was now speedily effected;—and ere midnight the old rusty file and the hands which wielded it by turns, had done their duty.

Up to this moment the baronet had scarcely been able to bring himself to believe that escape from the dungeon was really within the range of probability. He had laboured on in that same spirit of desperation which prompts the drowning man to clutch at a straw; and now that he heard himself called upon by his companion to follow through the aperture, he was as much bewildered with mingled hope and fear as that same perishing wretch might be supposed to feel when awakening on the bank to which some succouring hand had drawn him.

Unhesitatingly did Page introduce himself, legs foremost, into the large opening made in the wall; but before the baronet attempted the passage, the commercial traveller ascertained, to the ineffable joy

of both that the door of the cellar into which he had thus entered, was not locked. Inspired by this assurance, Sir Richard Stamford followed his leader; —and now they paused for a few minutes to gain breath and deliberate upon the course to be adopted.

The decision to which they came was indeed the only alternative that the circumstances offered: namely, to steal up into the house as gently as possible, and risk all the rest. It might be that they would succeed in escaping stealthily forth into the street: it might also happen that they would be overheard by the inmates; and in this latter case they must prepare to resort to means of either persuasion or violence, according to the nature of the individuals with whom they were thus to be brought in contact.

Page opened the cellar door as noiselessly as possible—and all was darkness and silence. He advanced a few steps, groping about with his extended arms. In a few moments his hands encountered the bannisters of a staircase; and up those steps he slowly and cautiously ascended, Sir Richard Stamford following close behind.

Still all was darkness and silence in the house!

They gained the ground-floor in this manner; and on entering the passage at the head of the kitchen-stairs up which they had just come, a faint glimmering of light, shed by some lamp outside or from some opposite window, peeped through the dingy fan-light over the low and narrow street-door at the farther end.

This sickly and ineffectual gleaming was just sufficient to show the two fugitives where that door was situated—but did not enable them to catch the slightest glimpse of each other's countenance.

And still all was darkness and silence in the house!

Slowly—noiselessly—and with painful caution, as if they were afraid of making even a board creak beneath their feet, they crept along the passage—taking five minutes to thread a little corridor of about as many yards in length.

Page was in advance, and consequently gained the street-door first.

He passed his hand hastily up and down, and felt that it was bolted: the key was however in the lock.

To draw back the bolts without noise was not a very easy task—for they creaked alarmingly even when moved a hair's breadth; and so gradually was this portion of the momentous night's work performed, that upwards of ten minutes were wasted thereat. But at length the bolts were drawn back —and the door was unlocked!

It now struck Page that if he and his companion were both to sally forth together, they would be more likely to attract the notice of any of their enemies who might be lurking about, than if they departed separately. But the commercial traveller dared not even trust his voice to whisper this proposal to the baronet; for he knew how even the faintest utterance of the human tongue is apt to sound amidst the deep silence in which a house is plunged at the dead of night;—and he feared that if an alarm were raised in that dwelling, it would spread throughout the neighbourhood, so that their recapture would certainly ensue. On the other hand he conjectured that if he were to open the door and issue forth himself, the baronet, in his anxiety to escape, would not have the prudence or forethought to remain a little while behind;—and in this perplexity, Page resolved upon a course which was in reality motived only by a precautionary sense, whereas it subsequently appeared in Sir Richard Stamford's estimation to be a deed of magnanimous generosity.

In a word, then, the commercial traveller opened the door as noiselessly as he could, and seizing the baronet's arm pushed him gently forth. Sir Richard was only too glad to obey the impulse; and the moment he had crossed the threshold into the open air, the door was closed behind him.

It was at this instant that a groan, apparently coming from an upper storey, but sounding with a sepulchral hollowness as if it were in an empty house, fell upon the startled ears of the commercial traveller. Still he listened, instead of rushing precipitately from the place—for the moan he had heard was rather an indication of great agony, either mental or physical, than of alarm arising from any disturbance in the house.

The groaning was repeated and continued; and the commercial traveller, ever prying and inquisitive, began to experience an inclination to satisfy his curiosity in respect to these doleful sounds. Creeping to the bottom of the stairs, he again listened with breathless attention; and now the moaning, which every instant became more intense, was mingled with ejaculations of pain and broken sentences conveying some idea of the forlorn position of the wretch who uttered them.

"Oh! this is dreadful——dreadful! To be deserted——left to die alone——alone——alone—— all alone——in this desolate place! Will no one come?—a single drop of water——only a single drop——my God! my God!"

The commercial traveller had gathered sufficient to convince him that he incurred not the slightest risk by ascending to the succour of the unhappy man whose lamentations thus reached his ears;—and he accordingly groped his way up a narrow staircase, until a faint light, glimmering through the chinks in the door of a back room on the second storey, induced him to pause there and listen again.

The moans came from within; and Page unhesitatingly entered the chamber.

Heavens! what a spectacle met his eyes!

In a wretched bed, the blankets of which were of the most filthy description, lay an old man whose face was as pale as that of a corpse, and whose dim and glassy eyes, so haggard and sunken, were surrounded with that deep blueish tint which denotes the influence of a wasting disease and heralds the approach of death. His cheeks were hollow and thin; and a beard of several days' growth enhanced the hideousness of his appearance. One emaciated arm supported the aching head—the other lay outside the coverlid, which the hand was clutching as if in the frenzy of despair.

The chamber was not without furniture: but everything denoted neglect, and was characterized rather by a loathsome squalor than a downright penury. For there was food in a cupboard, the door of which stood open—and there was a bottle of spirits upon a shelf—and three or four shillings, together with some half-pence, lay upon the mantle. But everywhere dust and dirt had accumulated,—on the floor, where a scanty carpet lay all kicked up—on the blackened and grease-stained walls—on the dingy window-blind—on the chest of drawers the table, the two or three chairs, and the bed itself!

Such was the scene revealed to the eyes of the commercial traveller by means of a candle dimly burning and with a wick so long that it appeared as if it had not been snuffed for hours. A gleam of joy shot athwart the wan and ghastly countenance of the invalid as a human being thus burst upon his frightful loneliness: and Page's immediate impulse was to pour water into a cup and hold it to the parched lips of the sufferer. But the man could not raise himself even a single inch to partake of the beverage, ardently longed for though it were; and the commercial traveller was forced to lift and sustain him while he poured the water down his throat.

The cup was emptied—and as the invalid fell back in the sorry, sordid couch, his hollow eyes were raised with an expression of indescribable gratitude towards Page's countenance.

"What more can I do for you, my good man?" asked the commercial traveller, in a mild and encouraging tone. "You seem to be very, very ill—and alone——"

"Yes—yes—all alone—alone!" murmured the invalid, knitting his brows in a manner indicative of mingled rage and despair. "The ungrateful girl ——Julia——to desert her own father——leave me for hours——yes, hours——"

"Then you are hungry?—you require food—and you are unable to rise from your bed to take it?" exclaimed Page. "Ah! I understand, poor man—but I will get you food."

"Stay, sir—stay!" said the invalid, as the commercial traveller was turning towards the cupboard to fetch a morsel of bread to place between the famished being's lips: "stay, sir," he repeated, his voice acquiring strength, now that his throat was no longer parched with a torturing thirst,—"I do not require food—I could not eat—I—I am dying!"

"I will run and fetch hither a doctor!" exclaimed the bustling and agile Page, now springing towards the door.

"No—no—stay, I implore you!" said the invalid, in an appealing tone. "I am past all hope—beyond the influence of human aid—I feel that I am dying! And when I am gone—but I must not waste words—my voice is failing me—a dimness is coming over my eyes—where are you, sir?—why have you put out the light?"

And the workings of the invalid's ghastly countenance were horrible—horrible to behold!

"I am here, my good man—and I have not extinguished the light," returned Page, bending over the bed. "But speak—tell me what you have to say—give me your injunctions——"

"Stoop down—place your ear close to my lips," resumed the dying man, now speaking with extreme difficulty: "are you close?"

"Yes—yes—proceed!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, breathless with suspense.

"Place your hand beneath my pillow—just under my head," gasped the old man: "there—take that pocket-book——tell Julia——Oh! I am dying——My God! my God! pardon——mercy——Hannah ——Julia—Julia——Oh! mercy——pardon——pardon——"

And with a deep groan, he expired.

At the same instant, as if with an ominous emblematic significancy, the candle sank down in its socket and was extinguished.

A panic-terror seized upon the commercial traveller; for the scene of death which he had just witnessed, and to the contemplation whereof he had been so suddenly and unexpectedly impelled by circumstances, was horrible and shocking. There was likewise something appalling in the simultaneousness with which the living man had changed into a breathless corse and the chamber was plunged into total darkness; and the state of excitement in which Page had been kept for many, many hours, now underwent a rapid and fearful reaction.

Grasping, however, the pocket-book which he had taken from beneath the old man's pillow, he hastened precipitately down the stairs,—his almost frantic speed accelerated by the horrible thought that somebody or *something* was pursuing him, and that the cold hand of a corpse would suddenly be laid upon his shoulder or would clutch the skirts of his coat.

On reaching the front-door, he began to breathe a little more freely; and while he paused for an instant to secure the pocket-book about his person, a sense of all the danger with which his egress from the house would be attended, rushed back to his mind. The death scene had temporarily driven from his recollection the previous incidents of the night: but now he remembered that he had escaped from a horrible dungeon, and that should he encounter any of the Magsman's party while issuing forth into the street, his re-capture and renewed imprisonment were inevitable.

Nevertheless, he could not remain longer in this house of death—for the echoes of his own footsteps appeared to be the sounds of the corpse descending the stairs in pursuit of him!

Opening the door, therefore, with the courage of utter desperation, Mr. Page stepped across the threshold—and a rapid glance up and down the narrow court in which he now found himself, afforded the encouraging assurance that his movements were unobserved.

That hurried, anxious glance was sufficient to show the commercial traveller that the houses enclosing this vile alley into which he had emerged, were poor and wretched in outward appearance, and that the locality was evidently a low and disreputable neighbourhood. For an instant his eyes lingered on the two houses of which he had seen the interior: namely, the one whence he had just emerged—and that where he had been incarcerated. Lights gleamed from the upper windows of the latter; and Page thought within himself, "The miscreants in those chambers little suspect that their accursed subterranean cell is now empty!"

Away he sped from the court, the name of which he vainly endeavoured to decypher beneath the entrance archway where it was painted;—and thence he emerged into a long, narrow, and unpaved street, the aspect of whose houses confirmed him in his opinion that he was in some low neighbourhood. On he went at random, in the hope of finding a hackney-coach stand, and not choosing to ask where he was of the few stragglers whom he met, for fear of exciting some suspicion which might lead him into fresh embarrassments:—on he went, we say, penetrating through a maze of streets, and alleys, and little thoroughfares, none of the names whereof could he possibly ascertain in the darkness of the night.

Suddenly the clock of some neighbouring church proclaimed the hour of two in the morning;—and in a few minutes Page found himself in the immediate vicinity of a dock, which he knew to be in the dis-

trict of Wapping. It was, then, in the eastern quarters of London that the den existed where he had been imprisoned; but were he asked to retrace his steps from the point he had now gained to the place whence he had escaped, the endeavour would have proved utterly abortive.

His course was, however, at present clear enough; and in about three quarters of an hour he emerged upon Tower Hill. There he was fortunate enough to discover a hackney-coach, which set him down at the George and Blue Boar just as the thousand clocks of the metropolis were striking three.

CHAPTER XIV.

LORD FLORIMEL.

We must now return to the establishment of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall: for while the scene already related was taking place in one room between Mr. Harley and Octavia Clarendon, an incident of some importance was occurring in another.

It was nine o'clock on that memorable evening —the young ladies in the employment of Mrs. Brace were busily occupied in consigning the caps, bonnets, and dresses to band-boxes and drawers, preparatory to the closing of the shop for the night —and the worthy mistress of the establishment was superintending these proceedings, when a servant entered from the interior of the dwelling-house and gave her some whispered information.

"Ah! Lord Florimel!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, in an under tone; and she forthwith hastened to her own private sitting-room at the back of the premises.

It was a small but elegantly furnished apartment, —all its arrangements being quite consistent with that good taste which we have already noticed as pervading the toilette of the lady herself. Vases filled with artificial flowers—a few good pictures in handsome but not gaudy frames—a French timepiece in *or-molu*—several little ivory statues, six or eight inches high, and exquisitely carved—and a book-case containing the standard works,—these constituted the principal ornaments of the room. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate—and the wax candles shed their lustre upon the rich crimson draperies attached to the windows.

Lounging negligently in an arm-chair, tapping his boot with the end of his slim gold-headed cane, and with his eyes fixed listlessly upon the timepiece, was a young nobleman whom we must particularly introduce to our readers.

Lord Florimel—for that was his name—had only a few months previously succeeded to the family title and estates in consequence of the sudden death of an elder brother; and although he was still dressed in mourning his attire was of the most elegant description. But he needed no adventitious aid to enhance the natural beauty of his person. For beautiful he indeed was,—not handsome—but with that cast of countenance for which Grecian women are so justly celebrated. He was scarcely two-and-twenty years of age; and a razor had never touched his cheeks, which had all the damask and peach-like loveliness peculiar to the softer sex. His complexion was singularly fair, clear, and stainless: his nose was small and perfectly straight;—his lips were red and full, and his teeth brilliantly white and faultlessly even. His neck was long and gracefully turned—his ears remarkably small and delicate. He wore his rich chesnut hair flowing in a wavy mass over his shoulders; and as it was parted with great precision above the high and open forehead, its arrangement completed the feminine appearance of the youthful noble's countenance. His eyes were large, dark, and beaming with sensual passions, the lascivious fires of which were however subdued somewhat by the long and slightly curling fringes of the deepest jet which served as a veil to temper the ardent expression of those splendid orbs.

In stature Lord Florimel was very short for a man, though he was above the middle height of woman. His form was slight—but his symmetry was complete; and nothing could exceed the delicate whiteness of his hands and the diminutive modelling of his feet. His voice corresponded with this feminine style of beauty: it was clear and melodious as a flute, sounding deliciously as that of a lovely woman to the ear. His conversation was moreover particularly choice and select: though a voluptuary, he was not a rake—and he never indulged in profane jests, oaths, and imprecations. He was addicted to the pleasure of love—but he abjured those of wine; and, disliking the society of men, he passed nearly all his time amongst females. Fickle, inconstant, and easily excited by a new and pretty face, he had all the caprices of a wanton woman. But his character did not lack generous sentiments nor elevated feelings: he could be charitable in the extreme, when the humour seized upon him—and though he never lent money to a fashionable and dissipated friend, he would drop a guinea into the hand of the poor mendicant who appeared to be a worthy object for relief.

He was unmarried, and likely to remain so: for the idea of linking himself to one woman was, in his estimation, something too dreadful to contemplate. Possessed of immense wealth, and with no parents nor elderly relatives to advise him, he devoted all his time and all his thoughts to the pleasures of love; and, extravagant in nothing else, he lavished large sums upon these objects of his desires. Mrs. Brace—the accommodating Mrs. Brace—was a very useful person to such a character as Lord Florimel; and of the dozen young ladies in her service at least two-thirds had ministered to the passing and transitory phantasies of this nobleman.

"Well," my dear friend," said Florimel, half-rising from his seat and immediately sinking back again, when Mrs. Brace entered the room,—"I am come to consult you as usual. You see before you a man completely dependent upon your kind offices to procure him a little variety in the sphere of Venus; for I can assure you that during the last ten days, I have not encountered, either in my walks or drives, a single face that has excited a new emotion in my breast."

"Your lordship is greatly to be pitied," observed Mrs. Brace, with a smile.

"Pitied!" he ejaculated: "I am indeed. But permit me to tell you, my good friend," he continued, his eyes settling upon the milliner's ample bust, a considerable portion of which was exposed by the low corsage that was then in fashion,—"permit me to tell you that you are looking quite delightful this evening. One would scarcely believe that you could be seven-and-twenty;"—Florimel knew that she was forty;—"for your complexion is perfectly brilliant—your teeth are like pearls—your eyes flash fires—yes, fires most wanton and seductive at the

same time—and your hair is radiant in its glossy blackness."

"Is it possible, my dear Florimel," asked Mrs. Brace, with her sweetest smile,—"is it possible that you are going to make love to me by way of a change?"

"Upon my word I have very serious thoughts of so doing," responded the young noble, drawing his chair closer to that on which the milliner sate. "Ah! now I have caught a glimpse of your foot and ankle," he exclaimed; "and, in good sooth, you may well be proud ——"

"Oh! I am not conceited—I am not vain, Florimel," interrupted Mrs. Brace; for as the reader may observe, she was on very intimate terms with the youthful noble—though even while she addressed him thus familiarly, it was with an under-current of respectful deference in her tone and manner.

"Neither vain nor conceited, my dear friend?" repeated Florimel: "then you are deserving of the highest commendation—for, as sure as my Christian name is Gabriel, you have every reason to be proud of your personal appearance. A happy man was Mr. Brace when he first led you to the altar——"

"My lord, you are bantering me!" exclaimed the milliner, speaking in so severe a tone and starting with such galvanic suddenness that Florimel, who had been gazing intently upon her foot and ankle, raised his eyes in amazement to her countenance, on which the colour was coming and going with a rapidity of transition that indicated the working of strong emotions in her bosom.

"My dear friend, have I angered you?" asked the young nobleman, taking her hand. "You are well aware that I am incapable of wounding your feelings wantonly——"

"Yes—yes, my lord,—I believe you," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "It was a sudden indisposition—a pang shooting through the head, and which ruffled my temper——"

"Then you forgive me for any indiscretion that I may have committed by so silly an allusion to your late husband?" said Florimel, not altogether believing the story of the sudden indisposition. "However, we will change the conversation," he added, observing that Mrs. Brace darted upon him a look so strange and sinister that it made him feel uneasy. "Let us go back to the object of my visit. I was telling you, my dear friend, that for the last ten days or a fortnight I have not encountered a new face deserving a sigh or worthy of a tender emotion; and it struck me that you might have it in your power——"

"I think that I can put you in the way of an adventure alike original and agreeable," observed Mrs. Brace, who had by this time recovered her wonted equanimity and affability.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Speak—I am dying to hear your explanations."

"Have a little patience," said the milliner, now again smiling sweetly; "and you shall know everything in good time. A certain gay gentleman of my acquaintance has discovered in a secluded wilderness two of the fairest flowers that ever graced the earth with their presence."

"Sisters, doubtless?" observed Florimel, interrogatively.

"Yes—and of a beauty eclipsing all the brilliant charms that dazzle the eye in the circle of fashion," continued Mrs. Brace. "One of these delightful creatures I have already seen—indeed, to speak candidly, she is at this very moment beneath my roof——"

"You are determined to wheedle me out of a hundred guineas to-night!" exclaimed the young nobleman, his cheeks flushing and his eyes beaming with licentious fires.

"Nay—the elder sister is already disposed of," returned Mrs. Brace. "While we are now conversing together she is receiving her first lesson in the school of Venus; but the younger sister shall be yours."

"And is the one whom you thus promise me, as charming as the other?" asked the youthful voluptuary.

"I have not seen her yet," responded Mrs. Brace; "but I am assured that she is equal to her sister—and if this be the case, it strikes me that your lordship will have at length found an object on whom your affections will probably settle for a considerable period."

"You enchant me!" ejaculated Florimel. "When and where can I see this angel?"

"Permit me to give you a brief but necessary explanation," said the milliner. "These sisters are the children of a poor but respectable and highly connected gentleman, who is at present away from home. Octavia, the elder, has already fallen into good hands;—Pauline, the younger, may belong to you. Octavia of course believes that her lover intends to marry her: whereas I need scarcely inform you that nothing is farther from his intention. Last night he declared his affection—to-night she has met him in this house: you may therefore imagine that her heart is very susceptible of the tender passion. It is fair to presume that Pauline may be won with equal ease;—and no one is better calculated to achieve such a conquest than yourself."

"I shall undertake it with all the ardour of a most unpremeditated wooer," exclaimed Lord Florimel.

"Nay—I have thought of a scheme by which the fortress may be surprised and the victory won with ease," observed Mrs. Brace. "Moreover, the adventure which I propose has in it something so romantic—so truly original—so *piquant*, to use a French expression—that I am certain beforehand of the delight with which you will enter into it."

"My curiosity is even painfully excited," cried the young voluptuary.

"Do you not think that you would look well in female attire?" demanded Mrs. Brace, surveying him with an arch smile.

"Oh! now I comprehend you, my dear friend!" exclaimed Florimel. "It will be delicious! A young lady—separated from her mother in a crowd—lost her way—late in the evening—dreadfully alarmed—implores an asylum for the night——"

"Excellent!" cried Mrs. Brace. "Your lordship enters fully into the spirit of my meaning. And now that I have thus far gratified your curiosity, my dear Florimel, you will perhaps grant me your patience while I make a few very necessary observations in connexion with these charming sisters. I have already told you that a certain gay gentleman, to whose kind patronage I am as much indebted as to your own, has won the affections of Octavia, the elder: but as cogent reasons will prevent him from visiting her at her own abode when the father returns home, he is naturally desirous that she should consent to meet him here as frequently as it may suit his fancy to receive her. It would however be a difficult task for Octavia to remain long and often absent from home, without having the company of her sister;—and I have therefore concluded that in order to secure the connivance of Pauline in Octavia's love intrigues, it is absolutely necessary that Pauline herself should be led into a similar adventure. The two sisters will thus make confidants of each other—and, by acting in concert, they will set the watchfulness of the father at defiance."

"Most admirably reasoned!" exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Each sister being provided with a lover, they cannot reproach each other, but will mutually assist in the delightful intrigues! I must therefore presume that Octavia's gallant has already recommended you to provide a lover for Pauline; and that you have honoured me with the preference."

"Octavia's admirer consulted me upon the subject just now, before his fair one arrived," answered Mrs. Brace: "and he left it to my discretion to manage matters in such a way that his intrigue with the young lady should be enveloped in as much mystery and shrouded in as much security as possible."

"Then I presume that he is a man of rank, and married to a jealous wife?" said Florimel.

"He is a man of rank, and shortly to be married," responded Mrs. Brace. "But you know that I never mention to the gentlemen of my acquaintance anything that regards each other. 'Honour and secrecy'—that is my motto, Florimel."

"I am well aware how discreet you are on those points, my dear friend," observed the young nobleman; "and you will give me credit for a total absence of curiosity relative to the affairs of other people. Little does it matter to me who or what Octavia's lover is, so long as I possess the charming Pauline. But you have not yet told me when I am to commence the pleasing adventure which so much suits my fancy."

"In all probability to-morrow evening," answered Mrs. Brace. "I will however send you a line in the

the morning to relieve you from suspense on that head."

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed the young nobleman. "Bid your messenger wait a few minutes—he shall not return empty-handed."

"You are always generous, my dear Florimel," said the milliner, with one of her sweetest smiles. "Shall I offer you a glass of wine?"

"No—I seldom drink anything stronger than coffee or richer than chocolate," observed the voluptuary, rising from his seat: then, as he surveyed himself complacently in the mirror over the mantelpiece, he said, "Verily and truly I do believe that I shall look uncommonly pretty, when dressed in female attire. But who is to preside over my toilette?—who will arrange my hair?" he demanded, turning abruptly towards the milliner, as the idea flashed to his mind.

"I am afraid that it will prove imperatively necessary for me to enact the part of lady's-maid," answered Mrs. Brace, laughing.

"I could not desire a more charming *camerista*," said Florimel, passing his hand gently over her somewhat buxom cheek—a liberty which the worthy lady did not in the slightest degree resent.

The young nobleman then took his leave, Mrs. Brace attending him as far as the passage leading into the house behind: and when she parted from him, a domestic in handsome livery escorted his lordship to the door opening into St. James's Square.

CHAPTER XV.

THE POCKET-BOOK.

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we left at the moment when he had succeeded in reaching the George and Blue Boar in safety, after his escape from the dungeon in the eastern district of the metropolis.

On gaining his chamber at the tavern, he hastened to examine the pocket-book which had fallen into his possession in so remarkable a manner: for although it was now three o'clock in the morning, and the commercial traveller was exhausted with the fatigues of the night, his curiosity was such that he could not retire to rest until he had completely gratified it.

Fortunately the materials for a fire were already laid in the grate in his bed-room; and applying a light to the faggot whereon the coal was piled up, he soon created a blaze that imparted a genial glow to his frame, which a few moments before was shivering from head to foot.

Seating himself in a chair drawn close to the comfortable hearth, Mr. Page proceeded to the inspection of the pocket-book. It was old—very old,—stained with grease in several places, and worn away at the edges. The strap, or fastening, was torn off; and it was tied round with a riband so faded and dirty that it was impossible to conjecture of what colour it had originally been.

Carefully laying the pocket-book open upon the table, the commercial traveller found that it contained several papers, very much soiled, worn, and dingy;—and these he examined one after another.

The first appeared to be a small packet, enclosing something soft and elastic to the touch; and on unfolding the two or three pieces of stained and mouldering paper in which the contents were wrapped, Page drew forth a long tress of hair. Though the dust had penetrated to this relic, which was neatly braided, it was nevertheless easy to perceive that the hair was of the darkest hue, and that it was soft as silk; and when the commercial traveller unrolled it carefully in his hands, it measured upwards of two feet in length. Yes—the jetty hue and the velvet softness remained to that hair: but the shining glossiness, which the idea inevitably associated with such a tress, had been dimmed and deadened by the hand of Time!

Having contemplated for several minutes that relic which appeared to tell of the loves and hopes of fond hearts in by-gone and better days, the commercial traveller minutely examined the papers which had enveloped it; and on the innermost one he at length succeeded in decyphering the following words, which the lapse of long, long years had all but obliterated:—

"*Hannah Lightfoot, her hair. St. James's Street. December*, 1756. *For her well-beloved.*"

Page started with surprise: for it will be remembered that on the evening when we first introduced him to our readers, in the commercial room at the George and Blue Boar, he related an anecdote, or rather alluded to a rumour, in which the names of George III and Hannah Lightfoot were coupled.

The discovery of this tress, which had no doubt belonged to the beautiful Quakeress of former times, served therefore to give a sharper zest to a curiosity already powerfully excited; and having restored the hair to its several envelopes, he lost no time in examining the next paper which he took from the pocket-book.

This was but a mere scrap—and, on minutely scrutinizing it, the commercial traveller discovered that it was a memorandum one half of which was wanting. It seemed as if the fold where the paper was doubled up, had so completely worn away that the document had parted in two, one portion whereof Page now held in his hand. But where was the other moiety? Vainly did he search amongst the contents of the pocket-book: the missing half was not there!

Disappointed and vexed, Page now addressed himself to the task of decyphering the writing on the piece that remained: and after some degree of trouble,—for the traces of the ink were so deadened by time that they appeared only of a dingy brown in some parts and of a light dirty yellow in others while the paper itself was so discoloured and brittle that it seemed as if it had been scorched at the fire,—the commercial traveller succeeded in making out the following fragment, written in a bold masculine hand:—

"TAKE notice, all ye whom it may concern, by these presents, that I [illegible] Wales, do hereby declare and a[illegible] and solemnly consider to be my [illegible] heaven and before God, the lik[illegible] Lightfoot, whom I sincerely, to [illegible] all my heart and with all my so[illegible] tenderly, and devotedly loveth [illegible] heart and all her soul: and kno[illegible] it may concern, that I do solem[illegible] myself, before God and in the s[illegible] when the will of the Almighty [illegible] august and well-beloved father [illegible] assent and most gracious permi[illegible] of my marriage with the under[illegible] er, in case of perseverance in th[illegible] grieves me,—then, on my accen[illegible]

these realms, on my sire's demi
I declare that I will, without de
—and in token that we do abso
husband and wife, we have join
to this document, in the pre
this third day of April, One Th

"Witness,
"WILLIAM STAMFORD, Bart.

Nothing could exceed the vexation and disappointment of the commercial traveller when, having perused the above fragment, he again and again sought fruitlessly amongst the contents of the pocket-book for the other half of the paper.

That the document, if perfect, involved an important secret connected with the Court of England, he felt assured; and the circumstance that the paper was witnessed by the late Sir William Stamford, seemed to strengthen, at least in the mind of Page, the old standing rumour that there was some extraordinary mystery attached to the birth of the present baronet, Sir Richard. At all events, it was clear that the commercial traveller had become possessed of relics of great interest, if not of value, in connexion with the Lightfoot family; and he began to wonder who the old man from whom he had received the pocket-book, could possibly have been.

But suddenly abandoning his conjectures, and hoping to find some clue to their elucidation in the contents of the pocket-book itself, the commercial traveller proceeded in his scrutiny thereof.

The next paper that he took up was as dingy, brittle, and soiled as the former: but the writing was more legible. It was a short note, and ran as follows:—

"*February* 9, 1757.

"I HAVE received the letter in which thou revealest to me thy princely rank. I am bewildered—dazzled—stupified. A consternation is upon me, even while I pen these few lines. But I am writing mechanically, as it were: for not an emotion stirs in my soul. All seems dead within me, save the memory of what has passed;—and that appears a dream! It is as if my feelings were lulled into an awful calm, full of dread omen and terrible presentiment. What can this mean? I know not! It is unnatural to a degree. All save my love for thee is dead within me.

"To his Royal Highness "Thine ever,
"The Prince of Wales. "H. L."

The handwriting in this letter was in the best, most fluent, and most graceful style of female penmanship; and it required not a moment's reflection to convince Page that the authoress could be none other than the beautiful Quakeress, Hannah Lightfoot.

The next paper which he took up was likewise a letter;—and its contents ran thus:—

"*February* 11*th*, 1757.

"I AM reassured, my well-beloved Prince: thy kindness hath restored me to the enjoyment of the fullest confidence. But thou art wrong to suppose that I ever doubted thine affection. No—it was not thy love concerning which my heart was filled with misgivings: it was respecting thine ability to keep the promise, that I was sorely troubled. Now I am happy—the more so that my brother knows all and chides me not. I will keep the appointment which thou hast notified to me in thy most kind letter.

"Adieu, dear Prince, until to-morrow evening.
"HANNAH L."

The next paper that the commercial traveller took from his pocket-book, was another letter from the Quakeress, and was couched in the ensuing terms:—

"MY well-beloved Prince—my own dear, dear husband—thou wilt rejoice in the tidings which I have taken up my pen to impart. I am in the way to become a mother—in a condition which gives me the delicious assurance that I shall in due time present thee with a pledge of my undying, unalterable affection. Lady Stamford is with me at this moment: she is most kind and affectionate towards me. This afternoon I shall accompany her to the Manor: she insists upon me paying this visit to her beautiful seat near Aylesbury;—and, independently of her great friendship for me, I am the more induced to accept her invitation on account of the sympathy which now exists between us. For it was only yesterday that Lady Stamford perceived that she herself was in a condition calculated to be most pleasing to Sir William, who tenderly loves her; and when we came to compare notes, we found that we both made the same discovery at the same moment. This singular coincidence may appear trifling to dwell upon, dear Prince: but it hath made an impression on my mind. Therefore, as thou art to leave town for a few days in attendance on thine august sire, I will, with thy permission, accompany Sir William and Lady Stamford to Aylesbury—promising thee faithfully to return home again by Saturday next, to keep the appointment which thou hast so kindly given me.

"But I cannot conclude this hasty note, without renewing the assurances of my unalterable love, and thanking thee most sincerely for the kindred pledges which thou hast recorded in thy most welcome missive of yesterday. I have kissed that dear letter a thousand times. I shall kiss it ten thousand times more ere we meet again, although our separation be but for a few days.

"Ever thine affectionate, loving, and devoted wife.
"*June* 23*rd*, 1757. "HANNAH."

This letter appeared to contain a startling proof of the marriage of the Quakeress with George III, when he was Prince of Wales. Page referred again to the fragment to which the name of Sir William Stamford appeared as a witness: but he could not satisfy himself as to the date of the year which it bore. Nevertheless, he conjectured that this date must be 1757; and in this case, that fragment might be taken as a clue to the momentous incident filling up the gap between the letter dated February 11th and the one dated June 23rd.

Being eager, however, to pursue his research into the extraordinary contents of the pocket-book, the commercial traveller devoted but a very few minutes to conjecture and surmise, ere he resumed his investigation. Accordingly, taking up another of the papers, he read as follows:—

"*Stamford Manor, January* 6*th*, 1758.

"HEART-BROKEN—distracted—devoured by grief, I arrived here at eleven o'clock last night. O heaven! that such should be my wretched—wretched fate! Thou hast never loved me—no—thou hast never loved me! I see it all now—my God! I see it all! Wherefore must this eternal separation take place? Hast thou no regard for the feelings of her who is about to become the mother of thy child? Alas! I know not what I write—my tears blind me—my brain is on fire. I fancy that I am going mad! But pardon me—pardon me for these reproaches. I will not erase them—I will not burn this letter, and commence a new one—because I wish that thou should'st perceive how very, very unhappy I really am! Write to me, my husband——No! I must never more call thee by that endearing name——Nevertheless, write to me—write to me!"

This note was without signature; but it was in the same handwriting as the others that bore the name of the unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot.

"January 6th, 1758," mused the commercial traveller, as his eyes dwelt upon the date at the head

of the letter: "that would be about the period when she must have been in daily expectation of becoming a mother. And she was perhaps confined at Stamford Manor? Ah! everthing tends to corroborate the rumour respecting the mystery attending the birth of the present baronet, Sir Richard Stamford. Well, it will be hard if these papers do not serve my turn in some way or another. They are worth buying up, I should think —and who knows but that Mr. J. H. Page may shortly become a rich man? But who could the old man in that miserable chamber have been?—whom was that Julia whom he invoked so passionately, and who appeared to have abandoned him in the hour of his dissolution? Fool that I am to ask myself questions to which no power of conjecture or skilfulness of surmise can possibly suggest satisfactory replies! Let me finish my examination of the pocket-book first—and think over the matter afterwards."

With these words, muttered to himself in a musing tone, the commercial traveller took up another letter; and he was somewhat surprised and startled, when he found that instead of bearing the slightest relationship to the affair of Hannah Lightfoot, it was addressed to no less a person than *Joseph Warren, at the Beggar's Staff, Horsly-down*. This document bore the Aylesbury post-mark on the outside; and the contents were written in a fluent, mercantile hand. The paper itself, though soiled and greasy, was comparatively quite new: the date of the epistle was very recent; —and the ink had not lost its blackness.

Page hastened to read this letter, which ran as follows:—

"*March* 17*th*, 1794.

"The terms are accepted. A Bank-note for a hundred pounds is enclosed in this letter. You will acknowledge the receipt thereof, directing your reply, as heretofore, to Mr. M——, putting 'private' in the corner outside the letter. We will take three thousand in the first instance, and three thousand more this day six months. You will pack the *goods* up in a square deal box, the boards of which must be at least three-quarters of an inch thick; and the lid must be well nailed down. Book it per carrier; and print '*C. and Co.*' in the corner of the card of address. On receipt of the box, the other hundred pound note shall be duly forwarded."

Page was for some time at a loss to conjecture the meaning of this cautiously-worded letter, which had not the writer's name appended to it: but all of a sudden the reminiscence flashed to his mind that Sir Richard Stamford had alluded in his narrative to a *certain former transaction* which his villanous partners had had with Joe the Magsman, and which related to spurious coin;—and a second glance at the letter convinced him that it referred to this affair.

"Yes—'tis as clear as daylight!" thought Page. "There's the Aylesbury post-mark;—Mr. M—— means Mr. Martin: the word '*private*' was to be placed on the address of the Magsman's reply to prevent any of the clerks in the bank from opening it. The *goods* meant spurious *guineas*. Ah! the scoundrels—they're deep enough, God knows! The coin was to be packed in just such a box as that used by London bankers to remit specie—and '*C. and Co.*' stood for *Coutts and Company*. Egad! I see it all. The thing was so managed that when the box arrived at the bank, the cashier would receive and open it in the usual way, under the impression that it had really been sent from Coutts's. Well, the business was superbly done—and those fellows Martin and Ramsey are the cleverest rascals I ever heard of in all my life. But I shall not befriend Sir Richard the less on that account—and this letter will form a link in the chain of evidence against his partners. Now let us see what we have next?"

Thus speaking, the commercial traveller took up another paper, which was a short note in a neat female hand, but bearing no resemblance to the writing in any of the documents which he had previously read. Its contents were as laconic as they were mysterious:—

"*July* 7, 1794.

"The next post will bring you a long letter, full of the necessary explanations. Rub it over with the chemical preparation. I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening.

"L. L."

The envelope which had contained this note was not amongst the papers in the pocket-book; and Page was therefore unable to ascertain to whom it was addressed.

Two papers only now remained to be examined. One was a blank sheet folded in the form of a letter; and although Page held it up to the light and scrutinized it in all possible ways, he could not discover even the slightest trace of writing, nor any sign that the paper had ever been written on at all.

The last item in the contents of this singular pocket-book, was a scrap whereon the ensuing lines were scrawled with a pencil evidently guided by a tremulous hand:—

"Look under the stone in the farthest corner to the right, in the cellar. Use it wisely, Julia—and you will prosper; act rashly—and you will be ruined."

With the perusal of this laconic and mysterious note, ended the commercial traveller's investigation of the pocket-book; and having locked up the document safely in his trunk, he retired to rest, to dream of the Magsman—Hannah Lightfoot—Sir Richard Stamford—the old man who gave up the ghost in his presence—and, in a word, all the incidents of the last few hours.

But when Mr. Page awoke between nine and ten o'clock, he became painfully convinced of the fact that he had caught such a severe rheumatism from the dampness of the dungeon where he had been confined, as to render him utterly incapable of rising from his bed. His legs appeared to be completely paralysed; and his body ached all over, as if he had been soundly thrashed with cudgels.

Under these disagreeable circumstances, he was compelled to remain in bed and have medical advice without delay—while a messenger was despatched to Wood Street to inform Messrs. Hodges and Morley of his return to his quarters at the George and Blue Boar, and likewise to caution them (if it were yet time) not to send the ransom-money to the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRINCE OF WALES.

At about the same hour that Mr. Page awoke to the consciousness of an excruciating rheumatism in all his limbs, the following scene took place in Carlton House.

Picture to yourself, reader, a spacious bed-chamber, magnificently furnished and fitted up in the most luxurious style,—with a carpet so thick that the feet sank into it as if they were treading on soft sand—and with draperies so ample and rich that the casements were impervious to even the slightest breath of the sharp wintry air.

The couch stood upon a dais or raised platform, which was approached by three steps;—and the curtains, of satin and of gold brocade, flowed down from a canopy of purple velvet adorned with a plume of ostrich feathers.

By the side of the bed there was a night-table of rose-wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl; and on this were placed two or three bottles of soda-water, a bottle of hock, a small decanter half filled with brandy, a crystal jug containing the pure element, and several tumblers.

The toilette-table, which stood between the two windows nearest to the bed, was of the most elegant description. A large mirror, set in a gold frame, was fixed on supporters at the back, in such a manner that it could be moved to suit any light prevailing in the room, or any attitude which the individual consulting the glass might choose to take. There were two dressing-cases—both of the finest gold; and the smaller one was embellished round the edges with precious stones. To judge by the number of razors—tooth-brushes—combs—hair-brushes—nail-scissors—tweesers for removing superfluous hairs from the nose—boxes of dentifrice—jars of pomatum—perfumed soaps—phials of fragrant oil—bottles of scent—and cosmetics of all descriptions,—a stranger would have imagined that this dressing-table was spread for the use of at least a dozen persons: whereas all that luxury of the toilette was prepared for a single individual!

On a large oval table in the middle of the chamber, lay a miscellaneous collection of articles which to some extent bespoke the tastes of their royal owner, and in other respects served as an index to that wanton extravagance which lavished the gold wrung from the very vitals of the toiling millions, as if it were so much dross to be had for the mere trouble of stooping to pick it up. Boxing-gloves, foils, small swords, and single-sticks,—riding and hunting-whips, gold and silver spurs, new bridles, jockeys' caps, and two or three pairs of white leathern tops for boots,—fowling-pieces, duelling-pistols, rifles, powder-horns, shot-belts, and new flints for the locks of the fire-arms,—a pile of indecent pictures just imported from Paris, and the more calculated to inflame the imagination because the designs and the colouring were executed with an artistic perfection and a natural truthfulness well worthy of better subjects,—several elegantly bound books, the contents of which would bring a blush to the cheeks of even the inmates of a brothel,—a quantity of China monsters, which were much in vogue in those days and fetched an immense price,—watches, rings, breast-pins, stars, orders, and diamond garters, all heaped pell-mell as if they were things of no worth,—exquisite specimens of the beautiful art of carving in ivory, displayed in miniature figures representing the most eminent actresses of the age,—curious articles of *virtú*, such as old coins, fragments of weapons used by the Ancient Britons, pieces of pottery dug up from the ruins of a Roman villa, and even Catholic relics for which enormous sums had been given,—innumerable letters and *billets-doux*, from a countless host of ladies, and all scattered in the greatest confusion, some of them indeed never having been read, while out of others peeped locks of hair,—such were the principal items in that miscellaneous collection which covered the table in the centre of the room.

On a chiffonier placed between two of the windows, stood a large and remarkably handsome writing-desk, of a dark wood inlaid with golden ornaments of exquisite and very curious workmanship; and the lock was contrived in such a manner that no other key would fit than the one specially made for the purpose. This key the Prince invariably wore fastened to a thin but strong chain underneath his waistcoat: for the desk contained papers of great importance.

To the walls of the chamber were suspended several pictures, all painted by eminent men, but all most voluptuous in the subjects which they represented. Lucretia struggling in the arms of Tarquin,—Cleopatra pillowing the head of Mark Anthony upon her naked bosom,—Mars and Venus ensnared in the invisible net which Vulcan had spread upon the couch of their amorous dalliance,—the beautiful Andromeda bound in a state of utter nudity to a rock, and left as a prey to the monster from which Perseus rescues her,—Ariadne wandering in an equally primitive condition on the shores of Chio, when abandoned by Theseus,—a beautiful woman struggling in the lascivious embraces of a Satyr,—these were the principal subjects of the pictures.

In addition to the door by which this royal bed-chamber was usually entered, there were two others. One communicated with a private staircase, to which we shall have to allude more than once in the course of our narrative: the other led into a bath-room fitted up with oriental splendour, and adorned with full length mirrors in every direction. Voluptuous ottomans, a buffet covered with wines and delicious beverages, vases filled with perfumes, and an atmosphere warmed by artificial means, rendered this bathing-place so perfect in its luxury, that the most fastidious and the most difficult to please could not find a single fault.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, as we have already intimated, when the Prince of Wales awoke in the sumptuous couch which stood upon the dais in the bed-chamber. Opening his eyes languidly, his Royal Highness pressed his hand to his brow—for he had sate up until a late hour, and had imbibed a sufficiency of curaçoa-punch to leave behind the evaporating fumes even a far more racking head-ache than he now actually experienced.

Raising himself indolently in his bed, the Prince poured some hock into a large tumbler—then emptied therein the contents of a bottle of soda-water—and drank the delicious beverage ere its effervescence had time to subside.

In a few minutes the Prince consulted an elegant gold repeater set round with brilliants; and finding that it was close upon ten o'clock, he rang a bell by means of a silken cord which hung between the curtains and the wall.

A French valet, dressed in plain black, but with the greatest neatness and precision, and whose age was about thirty, instantly answered the summons.

"Germain," said the Prince of Wales, "the morning is very cold—is it not?"

"Very cold, your Royal Highness," answered the dependant, who spoke English without the slightest foreign accent.

"Then light the fire," continued the Prince.

This command was immediately obeyed; and in a few moments the flames went rushing up the wide-mouthed chimney with a cheerful sound.

"Tell me, Germain," said George, after a pause,—"was I very particularly drunk last night? Speak candidly now—and without any nonsense."

"Your Royal Highness was certainly not sober," responded the valet, in a submissive tone.

"Damn the sobriety!" ejaculated the Prince, impatiently. "I know perfectly well that I was far from sober—but I wish to be informed whether I was helpless or incapable."

"I had the honour of supporting your Royal Highness hither," said Germain.

"And of putting me into bed—eh?" cried the Prince.

"I experienced that honour likewise," answered the valet.

"Then I must have been damnation drunk—and there is no longer any doubt upon the point," said George. "But this soda-water lies disagreeably cold upon my stomach: give me a little drop of brandy, Germain."

This order was obeyed—and the Prince swallowed the dram with a relish.

"Now unlock the door leading to the private staircase," continued the Prince: "I am expecting Mr. Meagles—and he will breakfast with me."

"Your Royal Highness will take breakfast in bed?" observed the valet, interrogatively.

"No—I shall rise and have a bath first," was the reply. "But you will not serve up breakfast until eleven—and in the meantime I shall not want you."

Germain unlocked the door communicating with the secret stairs, and then withdrew.

In two or three minutes the sounds of voices, mingled with subdued laughter, reached the ears of the Prince, who started up in his bed, muttering to himself in a tone of vexation, "That damned fool Meagles is up to some of his tricks again—and yet I enjoined him to come alone!"

Scarcely had he thus given vent to his annoyance, when the door which Germain had so recently unlocked, was opened—the velvet curtain covering it, was thrust aside—and a gentleman made his appearance. But instead of immediately advancing to pay his respects to the Prince, he held the drapery back from the door until the person by whom he was accompanied had likewise emerged from the secret staircase and had entered the chamber.

But ere we allow these new-comers to proceed a step farther, we must tell the reader something about them.

First and foremost, then, we introduce to public notice Mr. Timothy Meagles, or, as his friends called him, plain Tim Meagles. He was an individual of about thirty years of age—short in stature, of slight and dapper build, but endowed with great physical strength. His face was marked with the small-pox: but he had expressive blue eyes, a fine set of teeth, and an enormous pair of well-curled auburn whiskers—so that he could not be pronounced positively ugly. It is true that his hair was of a fiery red, and that there was something coarse, if not actually vulgar, in the expression of his countenance: nevertheless, he was not without his admirers amongst the fair sex—and when he rode his splendid iron grey in the Park, he received a gracious bow from more than one lady of quality. Amongst the noblemen and gentlemen of fashion he was a special favourite,—not merely because he was known to enjoy the friendship of the Prince, but likewise because he was a very good fellow in many ways. For if any one required a second in a duel, to whom could he better apply than Tim Meagles?—if an umpire were wanted at a prize-fight or a pigeon-match, who was more competent than Tim Meagles? Behold him on the race-course—or out with the hounds—and it would do your heart good to contemplate the spirit with which the sport was entered into by Tim Meagles. Again, who could sing a better song or make a more fluent speech after dinner, than this gentleman of such numerous qualifications?—who could drink his three bottles of wine and make more sure of going home sober than Tim Meagles? His taste was as excellent in the choice of wines as his judgment was unquestionable with regard to horse-flesh. He could drive a four-in-hand or a tandem with equal proficiency: at steeple-chases he performed such wonderful feats that it appeared as if himself and his horse were possessed of a hundred lives apiece;—and in swimming, leaping, running, boxing, fencing, wrestling, and all kinds of gymnastics as well as manly sports, Tim Meagles was unapproachable by any of his friends or acquaintances. He was moreover reckoned a crack shot with either gun or pistol; and in respect to the "laws of honour" he was a peripatetic code.

But these qualifications, numerous though they be, do not make up half the sum of those possessed by Mr. Timothy Meagles. He was a most convenient and useful personage to the Prince of Wales, who in many instances would not have known what to do without him. Did his Royal Highness get into a scrape with the friends of some lady whom he had seduced, Tim Meagles was employed to hush the matter up:—did the illustrious spendthrift require money, Tim Meagles was indefatigable in his search after some capitalist to advance a loan:—and on more occasions than one had this same universal and ubiquitous agent conveyed the Prince's plate or Mrs. Fitzherbert's jewellery to a certain celebrated pawnbroker in the Strand. In fact, Tim Meagles' services were as varied and numerous as his qualifications or his resources. He was never at a loss for the means of carrying out anything which he undertook: his ingenuity in concocting plans was only equalled by his perseverance in pursuing an object until its final attainment. Nothing could daunt his courage or damp his spirits; and the greater the obstacles he had to encounter, the more energetic became his mode of action. It was all the same to him whether he had to console a forlorn and deserted fair one, or to thrash a bailiff; and his tact in hushing up a love affair was as admirable as his skill in appeasing a clamorous creditor.

The Prince not only retained him as an able instrument, but liked him as a good fellow and a pleasant companion; and it was sufficient that he thus patronised Tim Meagles, to induce all the friends and acquaintances of his Royal Highness to treat that useful individual as an equal. It was true that Tim loved a lark above all things, and did not much mind on whom he played off his practical jokes: but no one dared to frown on one who basked in the smiles of royalty;—and thus Mr. Meagles was not only tolerated in fashionable life, but actually courted.

At the time when we introduce him to our readers he had been about three years on this footing of fa-

tinacy with the Prince, who had picked him up at some race-course. What he was previously, we are at present unable to state: but this much we can aver in his favour—that however poor his origin might have been, he never boasted of either birth or wealth; —indeed, he possessed no ostensible source of income, beyond the remuneration which he received from the Prince and the money he picked up by betting, gambling, and similar pursuits. At the same time, no one could utter a word against his character; although prudent fathers and mothers who possessed marriageable daughters, did not look very well pleased if the young ladies happened to flirt with Mr. Timothy Meagles.

Such was the gentleman whom the Prince was expecting to breakfast on the morning of which we are writing. But who was the companion of Mr. Meagles on this occasion? We will enlighten our readers on that point, and then pursue the continuous thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN AMAZON.

About thirty-five years previously to the date mentioned at the opening of this tale, a certain Letitia Fluke was born in a miserable attic in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles's. As she grew up, she became remarkable for the beauty of her person, the masculine energy of her character, and the profligacy of her morals. Seduced by Rann, the celebrated highwayman who bore the *sobriquet* of "Sixteen-String Jack," she lived with him as his mistress for some time; and being endowed with extraordinary intelligence, she taught herself not only the rudiments of a good education, but likewise acquired the facility of expressing herself with grammatical accuracy and conversational elegance. After passing through various gradations, she married Sir John Lade, a wealthy and amorous baronet who was old enough to be her grandfather; and, on becoming Lady Letitia Lade, she soon wheedled herself into that sort of society at the West End which may be described as "not over particular." Her great personal beauty, splendid figure, easy virtue, and proficiency in all the sports of the field rendered her a special favourite with the dashing noblemen and gentlemen about town; and her reputation as a huntress was second only to that of her friend Tim Meagles as a hunter. She rode exquisitely—was always one of the foremost in at the death—and could leap a five-barred gate or practise any of the most daring feats characteristic of steeple-chasing.

This lady was it whom Meagles had brought with him to the Prince's room on the present occasion. She was however dressed in male attire, which became her admirably; and had it not been for the fulness of her bosom, she might have been taken by a stranger for a man; though, as a matter of course, it would have been a man of beardless face and of rather effeminate appearance. As it was, she looked like a modern Diana the Huntress: for she had spurs upon her boots and carried a riding-whip in her hand—and her form, though robust and vigorous, was admirably symmetrical, while all her movements were characterised by a graceful ease. Nothing could exceed the elegance of her costume. The hat, with its broad brim, set off her handsome countenance to the greatest advantage; and when she removed it on entering the chamber, her magnificent black hair showered in a myriad glossy ringlets over her broad and sloping shoulders. The blue frock-coat, braided most elaborately in front, fitted close to her form, developing the contours of her swelling hips, and giving a wasp-like appearance to the waist; while the grey small-clothes and the polished hessian-boots, with their tassels and spurs, completed an attire at once tasteful and becoming. Being tall in stature, Lady Letitia had a masculine air, and enacted the part of "the man" to perfection—the robust proportions and straightness of her limbs, with the solid firmness of the flesh, giving a fulness of shape to her entire person and rendering ample justice to the excellent "fit" of her garments.

Having admitted his disguised companion into the royal bed-chamber, Tim Meagles closed and locked the door by which they had thus entered; and bursting into a hearty laugh as he approached the couch, he exclaimed, "My dear Prince, you seem to stare at my friend here, as if you had never seen him before in all your life."

"And who the devil is it?" demanded his Royal Highness, sitting up in bed, while his countenance wore an expression which showed that he was half inclined to be angry. "Why! by heavens—'tis a woman," he exclaimed, as Letitia advanced towards him: then, his features expanding into a smile, he said, "Ah! my beautiful huntress—I recognise you now! Well, I suppose Meagles has brought you to breakfast with me—and this is an unexpected pleasure."

"Your Royal Highness is very kind thus to receive me," returned Letitia, her smile revealing a set of large but brilliant teeth. "It was not my fault—Meagles would insist upon bringing me—and your Royal Highness knows what a harum-scarum fellow he is."

"Egad! I was quite sure that you would be welcome," exclaimed Meagles, taking up a foil from the table and making a sham thrust at her ladyship. "Only conceive," he added, turning towards the Prince, who was surveying with gloating eyes the fine form of the huntress;—"I met our fair friend here as she was coming from her morning's ride——"

"I was just about to put up my horse in the stables in King Street," interrupted Lady Letitia: "for I went out alone for a good scamper at daybreak—and when I came back, there was not a groom nor even a boy in attendance to take the animal from me."

"Well—and I offered to unsaddle him for you," said Meagles.

"But I did it for myself while you were thinking about it," responded the lady, as she gave her friend a real lash with her riding-whip in acknowledgment of the sham thrust he had made at her.

"Don't pare him!" cried the Prince, laughing heartily as Tim Meagles vainly cut a caper to avoid the blow. "But had I anticipated the pleasure of your company, my dear Letitia, I would have risen to receive you. Indeed, I ordered Germain not to make his appearance with breakfast until eleven, though I knew that Meagles would be here at ten—

[OCTAVIA CLARENDON.]

because I had resolved to take a bath in the interim."

"Treat me just as if I were one of your own sex," exclaimed the lady; "and have your bath, by all means. Here—I will give you your dressing-gown and slippers," she continued, throwing the former upon the bed and placing the latter in a convenient position on the carpet by the side of the couch.

"And you mean me to rise in your presence?" asked the Prince, laughingly.

"Why not?" demanded Letitia. "You do not suppose that I shall go home and tell the baronet that I have had the honour of assisting at the toilette of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales?"

"Egad! you are quite capable of telling your husband anything," exclaimed Meagles, putting on a pair of boxing-gloves and attacking an imaginary antagonist in a most scientific fashion.

"You are very brave in buffetting the empty air, Tim," said Lady Letitia: "but if you really want some one to spar with you, I don't mind gratifying you in that way;"—and as she thus spoke, the Amazon threw down her riding-whip, and thrust her hands into a pair of pugilistic gloves.

"This is excellent!" cried the Prince, leaping from his couch, and putting on the figured silk dressing-gown and the embroidered morocco slippers which the lady had placed within his reach.

But while he was thus employed, the huntress had turned her back towards him, inasmuch as she had commenced a regular sparring match with Tim Meagles, who very complacently allowed her to buffett him about to her heart's content—though, had he chosen to exercise his skill in the art of self-defence, she would never have had a chance of even hitting him a single blow.

Presently Tim Meagles began to retreat rapidly—then he darted aside with an abrupt movement—then he leapt and capered all about the room in

order to weary his fair antagonist—both of them highly enjoying the sport, while the Prince of Wales was equally amused as a spectator. At last, the humorous Meagles put an end to the fun by suddenly dealing Lady Letitia a blow on the forehead, which knocked her flat down upon her back; but she rose laughing heartily and shewing aside the gloves, declared that she had had enough of boxing for the present occasion.

"Now we'll take a little drop of brandy, my brave Amazonian friend," exclaimed Meagles; and filling a couple of wine-glasses, he handed one to Lady Letitia, who tossed off the contents without winking. "By the bye, I quite forgot you, my dear Prince," observed Tim, turning towards his Royal Highness. "Shall I pour out a thimbleful?"

"No—not at present, Meagles," was the reply. "I have had my hock and soda-water, and a dram to sink it—and I therefore think that I shall be able to manage very well until after breakfast. But now for my bath," added the Prince, gathering his ample dressing-gown round his somewhat portly form, and descending from the dais.

"I envy your Royal Highness the possession of a bathing-room contiguous to your sleeping-chamber," said Lady Letitia. "I must positively make Sir John have one fitted up for me," she added, exchanging a rapid glance of intelligence with Meagles.

"Have you ever seen my bath-room?" inquired the Prince.

"Only as I catch a glimpse of it now through the half-open door," responded the Amazon. 'Your Royal Highness must recollect that this is the first time I have had the honour of being admitted to your private apartments."

"And it need not be the last," observed George, bending upon her a significant look; for although he had known the lady for two or three years, she had never struck him as being so handsome as she appeared on the present occasion.

"Excellent!" cried the huntress, laughing. "The Prince is paying me compliments!"

"Compliments? No—I am telling you truths," said George.

"Do you persist in forgetting that I am a gentleman for the nonce?"—and again she laughed.

"There, now!" cried Meagles, who had been pretending to be very busy in examining the lock of one of the Prince's rifles for the last two or three minutes; "I knew that your Royal Highness would not be displeased with me bringing Lady Letitia hither this morning?"

"Displeased!" ejaculated George: "I am delighted! But will you inspect my bath-room before I enter it?" he asked, turning again towards the lovely Amazon.

"Before you enter it?" repeated the lady, as if she had not heard aright. 'Why should you stand upon any such ceremony with me? I cannot succeed in persuading you to forget that my attire is unsuited to my sex."

"It becomes you admirably, at all events," observed the Prince, advancing close up to the huntress, who was leaning negligently against the toilette-table: then, proffering her his hand, he said, "Permit me to show you my bath-room."

"Oh! with much pleasure," exclaimed Lady Letitia. "It will perhaps afford me a hint for the establishment of some humble imitation at my own town residence."

Thus speaking, the Amazon accompanied the Prince into the adjacent chamber; and when he closed the door behind him, she affected not to perceive the incident.

"Well, upon my word, your Royal Highness possesses a perfect oriental bathing-room," she observed, throwing herself on one of the voluptuous ottomans and surveying the place in a leisurely and altogether unembarrassed manner: "it is really a delightful scene—exquisitely fitted up—and evincing in every detail that fine taste for which your Royal Highness is so justly celebrated."

"I am pleased that you admire my bath-room," said the Prince, seating himself by her side. "Can you not for the moment fancy that you are in some apartment attached to the harem of a Turkish palace?"

"Never having been in the Mussulmans' country, I cannot precisely make so free with my imagination," answered the huntress, in a lively tone. "At the same time, from all I have read, I could, without a very large stretch of the fancy conceive your Royal Highness to be a Sultan in *deshabille*," she added, with a significant glance at the Prince's figured silk dressing-gown and embroidered red morocco slippers.

"I am perfectly willing that you should entertain such a belief, on condition that you permit me to exercise my fancy with regard to yourself," exclaimed George, his eyes wandering over the charms of the huntress.

"Oh! certainly—I cannot have the least objection," she answered, "—especially after having composed even to the Grand Turk. And now tell me, pray, how you are inclined to take me?"

"For my Sultana of an hour," responded the Prince, throwing his arms round Lady Letitia's neck.

"You are determined to make me feel that I am a woman, in spite of my male attire," she exclaimed, laughing.

We must however leave the Prince and the huntress in the bath-room, and return to Mr. Meagles, who, at the moment when they were quitting the bed-chamber, was to all appearances very busily engaged in examining the miscellaneous articles strewed upon the central table.

Nor did he desist from his occupation as soon as he found himself alone: for he thought it probable that the Prince might return to fetch something, or to give him instructions relative to the admission of any one who might seek admission to the bed-chamber. He accordingly remained at the table, and began to examine the indecent French prints, which he had not seen before, as they had only arrived on the previous day. They were not however much to his taste; for Tim Meagles was too ardent and impassioned a votary at the shrine of Venus to need any stimulant of the kind for the purpose of exciting his imagination. Besides, he had a certain important object in view, and which engrossed his thoughts: he therefore turned the prints over in a listless manner, and very shortly passed from them to the inspection of the fire-arms. These he scrutinized with less abstraction of mind—for there were several new fowling-pieces and pistols which he had not seen before.

But when about a quarter of an hour had elapsed, Tim Meagles suddenly raised his eyes, looked around him and then listened. All was still; and then the next instant the Amazon's clear merry, musical laugh ringing from the bath-room, met Meagles' ears. A cloud swept over his countenance: for Tim Meagles, although he had long been on terms of the most tender intimacy with her was for a moment annoyed at himself for having purposely brought her to Carlton House on the present occasion with the view of throwing her into the arms of the Prince.

But this feeling of jealousy was as evanescent as, under the circumstances, it was absurd; and it was instantaneously succeeded by a lively satisfaction, as he thought to himself, "She has played her cards admirably—and she will succeed in engrossing the Prince's attention during the half-hour that I enjoined her to be sure and keep him engaged!"

Thus rejoicing in the success of a pre-arranged stratagem, Tim Meagles advanced to the royal couch, and took from beneath the pillow a long, thin gold chain to which a key of very peculiar workmanship was attached.

He then approached the writing-desk to which we have already alluded; and having carefully opened it, he proceeded to examine several small packets of papers, which were tied round with pink riband, and bore endorsements indicative of the various matters to which they respectively referred. But while thus occupied, he more than once cast an anxious look towards the door of the bath-room:—his apprehensions were not however verified by any sudden interruption on the part of the Prince.

His search in the two compartments of the desk lasted for upwards of ten minutes, there being numerous packets of papers, which he examined one after the other until nearly the whole were thus disposed of—and still he had not lighted on the particular parcel which he sought. He now began to fear that it might not be in the desk at all:—and yet he knew full well that the Prince kept every document of an important or private nature there. But, as it frequently happens in such cases, the very last packet which Tim Meagles drew from the desk bore the endorsement that he had hitherto so vainly sought; and having secured this little parcel about his person, he re-arranged all the others—locked the desk—and restored the key to its place of concealment under the pillow of the couch.

For a few moments a smile of triumph played upon the lips of Tim Meagles: but it almost immediately yielded to that calm, free-and-easy, and independent expression which was the natural characteristic of his features. Drawing a large arm-chair close to the fire, he deposited himself indolently in the luxurious seat, and lighted a cigar.

In a few minutes the door of the bath-room opened, and Lady Letitia came forth, followed by the Prince. Not a blush appeared upon her cheek—not the slightest embarrassment marked her manner, as she emerged from the bathing-room: but Meagles turned an arch look upon the Prince, exclaiming, "Well, are you displeased with me for having brought our Amazonian friend this morning?"

"Hold your tongue, Tim," cried the lady, laughing. "Ah! I thought I smelt the delightful flavour of the weed. I will keep you company with a cigar, while the Prince dresses himself — and then for breakfast. I already feel as hungry as a hunter."

"Or a huntress — which?" observed Meagles.

"Both," replied Lady Letitia, throwing herself upon a chair opposite to her humorous friend: then, taking an elegant ivory case from the pocket of her frock-coat, she drew forth a little Spanish cigarette, which she lighted by the aid of Meagles' full-flavoured Havannah.

"And so you smoke, Letitia—do you?" asked the Prince.

"Your Royal Highness sees that I can manage a cigarette," responded the huntress,—"but barely a cigar. And as for tobacco—I mean as it is smoked in a pipe——pah!—the idea makes me feel——"

"Not sick," interjected Meagles; "but only as if you would spoil your beautiful teeth. It's all vanity on your part, my beauty!—and if it wasn't for the teeth you'd be smoking the strongest Cavendish. I know!"

The huntress laughed, and then gave Tim a tap on the cheek, which compliment he returned by means of a somewhat hard smack upon the lady's back; whereupon she dealt him so sound a box on the ears that all the blood in his body seemed in a moment to rise into his cheeks and stagnate there. But the next instant he burst out laughing, and the Prince as well as the Amazon herself shared in the merriment.

A quarter of an hour was thus whiled away by means of smoking, jesting, and chattering; and in the interval the Prince of Wales had made such improvements in his toilette that he now appeared in an elegant *deshabillée*. Germain shortly afterwards entered the room, bearing a large silver tray containing the breakfast-things;—and although he observed Lady Letitia and instantly recognised her, he nevertheless affected to take no more notice of her presence than if she were a phantom visible only to the Prince and Meagles. For Germain was a very discreet Frenchman: otherwise he would not have long held the post of *valet intime*, or rather "confidential gentleman," about the person of the Prince of Wales.

An elegant breakfast was now served up, and to which both Lady Letitia and Tim Meagles did ample justice; but George had indulged overnight too liberally in curaçoa-punch to be able to eat with any degree of appetite in the morning.

"You don't seem to be peckish, my dear Prince," observed Meagles as he committed a second and very desperate assault upon a cold partridge pie.

"You made the punch too strong last night, Tim," answered his Royal Highness.

"Not a bit of it!" cried Meagles. "By the bye, my dear Prince," he continued, turning towards his Royal Highness, "I missed you from a quarter to six to nearly half-past ten last evening——"

"And you are very likely to miss me for precisely the same period *this* evening, Mr. Meagles," interrupted the Prince, suddenly assuming a tone that had just sufficient haughtiness in it to serve as a

tacit intimation that the subject was not to be dwelt upon.

"Then, instead of taking an early dinner with your Royal Highness, I shall fasten myself upon the hospitality of our Amazonian friend here," remarked Meagles, who understood the hint to abandon the delicate topic which he had touched upon, but who did not choose to appear disconcerted by the reproof that he had received.

"But I shall expect you at midnight, Tim," exclaimed the Prince, resuming his familiarity of manner as suddenly and as easily as he had thrown it aside for a momentary purpose: besides, it would not at all have suited his views to quarrel with an agent who was invaluable to him. "You and I shall be alone together to-night, Tim," he continued: "and then I will explain to you a little service that I require at your hands."

"Well, I don't mind promising to be here at midnight," said Meagles, who never chose to let it appear that he was servile in his attendance upon the Prince, or that he was a mere toad-eater constantly ready at the beck and call of his illustrious patron. "And now," he exclaimed, pushing away his plate, "we will have a drop of kirchwasser after this famous breakfast."

Thus speaking, he filled three liqueur-glasses with the potent cordial; and Lady Letitia tossed off her dram with as much real *gusto* as her two companions.

Shortly afterwards the Amazon and Tim Meagles took their departure by the private staircase; and the Prince of Wales rang the bell to desire the attendance of his secretary with the morning's newspapers and letters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAULINE.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening—and Pauline was seated by the fire in the front parlour of the villa. She was not merely alone in that room—but likewise in the house: for the charwoman had taken her departure some hours previously, and Octavia had been absent since five.

We do not pretend to know—at least for the present—what excuse the elder sister had made for thus leaving home for two evenings running, and for several hours on each occasion; but certain it is that Pauline was well satisfied, and entertained not the least idea of the real motive of Octavia's proceedings.

And now she was seated by the fire, as above stated, and occupied with her needle—not on fine work, but in the repairs of the household linen: for although our readers may smile at our minuteness of detail in this respect, we can assure them that we have only mentioned the circumstance in order to enhance their good opinion of the charming girl who thus sought to make up by her own thrift for the slenderness of her father's income. And as Pauline's tall and elegant figure was slightly inclined over her occupation, and the cheerful light of the fire streamed with Rembrandt effect upon her lovely countenance, she appeared far more interesting and attractive than she would have done if lounging on a luxurious sofa, attired in the richest style of fashion, and embellished with artificial ornaments. For not more beauteous in its glossy luxuriance would have seemed that dark brown hair, though sparkling with gems;—not more fair nor polished would have been that brow, though crowned with a tiara of diamonds;—nor more pure and stainless would have appeared that white neck, though adorned with brilliants worth a monarch's ransom.

Softly—how softly! did her long black lashes seem to repose on her fair cheeks, as she sate with her deep blue eyes fixed upon her work:—rich with the hues of health, and delicate with the purity of a taintless complexion, were the cheeks whereon those lashes rested:—and, oh! how beautiful was the entire countenance!

Gracefully rounded, too, were the plump white arms, as Pauline plied her needle with the tapering fingers, the rosy nails of which were as exquisite in their almond shape and as well cared for as if they belonged to a Duchess.

There was a smile of sweet contentment upon the moist red lips, which were just so slightly parted by that angelic expression as to afford a glimpse of the teeth that were faultlessly even, stainlessly perfect, and white as the pearls of the east;—and from between those lips came the sweet breath as if from the dewy leaves of the rose, and mixing in balmy fragrance with the air.

When, ever and anon, she raised her eyes from her work, they appeared radiant in their very softness: for no infelicitous reflections—no stormy emotions—no harrassing thoughts were harboured in her bosom; nor was her mind jarred with the conflict of strong passions.

Such was the charming creature against whose innocence and whose peace an infernal plot was already in train: and now do we tremble for thee, thou beauteous Pauline!

It was, as we said, about seven o'clock on the evening in question, when a loud and impatient double knock at the front door startled Pauline from her work; and she hastened to answer the summons, her heart fluttering with the hope that it was her father who had returned.

But she was disappointed in this respect: for a young lady appeared upon the threshold; and the moment Pauline opened the door, the stranger said in an anxious and appealing tone, "May I beseech you to grant me refuge for a few minutes and to shield me against the insults of ruffians in the garb of gentlemen?"

Pauline gave a ready assent to the prayer; and the stranger was instantaneously admitted into the parlour.

This apparent young lady was in reality no less a person than Lord Florimel; and, thanks to the taste and ingenuity of Mrs. Brace, his disguise was complete. His rich chesnut hair was curled into a thousand ringlets that showered from beneath an elegant gipsy hat over his shoulders; and the black silk gown which he wore, came high up to the very throat and was artistically padded in the corsage. The ample shawl was arranged with the utmost precision; and Florimel's feet and ankles appeared femininely diminutive in the silk stockings and neat boots which encased them. Altogether, he seemed and acted the well-bred lady to perfection.

Pauline hastened to place a chair near the fire for his accommodation; and then, resuming her own seat, appeared to await any explanatory remarks that he might choose to offer.

Florimel affected to be greatly agitated; and Pauline not only begged him to lay aside his bonnet, or rather gipsy-hat, but actually rose and unfastened the ribands with her own hands. Then, as the young nobleman felt the fingers of the beauteous girl touching his cheeks, and her form coming in contact with him as she thus rendered her aid to one whom she believed to be of her own sex, his blood began to circulate like lightning in his veins; and as he gazed up at the heavenly countenance which bent over him, while her very breath fanned his face, he experienced feelings of a softer, more tender, and purer nature than he had ever known before.

The bonnet was laid aside; and Pauline, as she resumed her seat, could not help thinking what a beautiful head of hair her visitor possessed. Moreover, there was something in Florimel's appearance which enlisted her sympathies in his favour; and as she cast a rapid glance at his pleasing features, she thought that she beheld in them the indications of many engaging and amiable qualities.

"I know not how to thank you sufficiently for your kindness towards me," said the young nobleman, rendering his naturally melodious voice as feminiinely subdued in tone as possible. "But what can have become of my dear mother?" he exclaimed, suddenly re-assuming an air of painful agitation. "Surely those rude people cannot have ill-treated her?"

"Compose yourself, my dear young lady," said Pauline, rising from her seat. "I will cheerfully go and look for your mother ——"

"Not for worlds, sweet Miss, would I have you stir out on my account!" interrupted Florimel. "There are several insolent men, who appeared to be very tipsy, parading up and down the road; and they pursued my mother and myself for a considerable distance. At length they rudely assaulted us —and we were separated. I fled in affright—hastening I knew not whither—and so bewildered and confused that I did not observe for several minutes that I was alone. You may conceive my terror when on stopping short, breathless and exhausted, I found that my mother was lost to my view. At the same instant I heard rapid footsteps approaching—and, dreading farther outrage, I ventured to seek a refuge in your house, where I perceived light gleaming through the shutters. That refuge you have generously accorded;—and now suffer me to become acquainted with the name of my kind hostess, that I may mention it again with gratitude elsewhere."

"My name is Pauline Clarendon," was the answer. "I regret that my father should be absent in the country—for, were he here, he would speedily consign to the hands of justice the insolent brawlers who have thus outraged you."

"Permit me, my dear Miss Clarendon," said the nobleman, who had thus acquired the assurance that her father was *not* at home,—"permit me to proffer you my friendship and solicit yours in return. My name is Gabriel Florimel ——"

"Oh! what a charming name!" ejaculated Pauline, quite involuntarily. "Gabrielle Florimel," she repeated in a musing tone, and with that stress upon the final syllable of the Christian name which showed that she took it in the feminine gender.

"Yes—Gabrielle Florimel," said the nobleman, instantly adopting the same pronunciation, which consisted merely in laying a stronger emphasis on the *el*. "I am delighted that you are pleased with my name. Yours is not less beautiful—Pauline Clarendon."

"Pardon me, Miss Florimel," said the young lady, hastily, "for having been so thoughtless and frivolous as to dwell on a name, when I should be thinking how I can best aid you in your present embarrassment. You will not permit me to go out and look for your mother? It is true that I am unacquainted with her person—but if she be wandering about in search of you, she might accost me to ask if I had seen any one answering your description ——"

"I again repeat, my dear Miss Clarendon," interrupted Florimel, "that I should never forgive myself if I allowed you to venture abroad and incur the chance of receiving such insults as those from which I have escaped. No—pray remain at home —and permit me to stay with you a little while."

"With infinite pleasure, Miss Florimel," said the amiable Pauline. "But your mother—will she not be uneasy?"

"She will hasten home, making sure that I have gone thither," answered the young nobleman. "But it is a long way off—in the immediate vicinity of Blackheath—and I tremble at the idea of returning all by myself into such a lonely neighbourhood. The hackney-coachmen are all connected with robbers and bad people ——"

"Do not distress yourself, my dear Miss Florimel," said Pauline, in a voice expressive of deep interest: for the wily nobleman had made these observations in such a melancholy and plaintive tone that the generous-hearted Miss Clarendon was profoundly touched by the apparently painful embarrassment in which her new friend was involved.

"I thank you sincerely for your sweet sympathy," returned Florimel: "but how am I to act?"—then, after a few moments' seeming reflection, he said, "If I only knew of some respectable lodging-house in the neighbourhood where I could obtain a bed ——"

"Oh! if that be all," interrupted Pauline, in the most cheerful tone that ever expressed a winning hospitality of disposition, "your difficulties are at an end. There is a spare-bed in this house at your service, my father being absent; and my sister whom I expect home at about eleven, will be as much rejoiced as myself to harbour you as a guest."

"Your kindness is such that I know not how to find words sufficient to acknowledge it," observed Florimel, inwardly rejoicing at the success which his stratagem was thus experiencing step by step. But when he fixed his eyes upon the lovely being seated opposite to him, and read all the goodness of her heart in the lineaments of her candid and ingenuous countenance,—and while the musical tones of her sweet voice yet sounded in his ears, and her gay and innocent smile appeared to beam upon him with a species of heavenly influence,—a sudden pang shot through his breast at the idea of the black treachery of his present conduct.

But, thrusting aside these unpleasant reflections, as a man brushes off a loathsome cob-web from the leaves of a charming rose which he desires to pluck, the youthful voluptuary continued the discourse in a cheerful tone.

Playing his part with the utmost caution, he

measured every word that he uttered—calculated every look that he threw towards her—and studied every attitude that he assumed and every movement that he made: so that not once—no, not even for a single instant, while they thus remained seated together in the parlour, did Pauline suspect that her agreeable and fascinating companion was otherwise than as represented.

Indeed, so well pleased were they with each other, that three hours elapsed ere they fancied that even one had passed away since the first moment that they met.

It was now ten o'clock—and Pauline prepared supper, of which they partook together; and thus the time was again whiled rapidly away, until eleven. Then the young lady began to grow anxious for the return of her sister: but Florimel was perfectly certain that Octavia would *not* come home until the morning! He accordingly affected to be getting sleepy, in the hope of inducing Pauline to retire to rest without delay; and she proposed to conduct her new friend to the spare-chamber, observing that she must sit up to await her sister's return. Florimel apologised for his drowsiness, and declared his intention of keeping her company in her vigil:—and thus another hour passed.

Midnight struck—and still Octavia came not.

"You are uneasy respecting your sister?" said the disguised nobleman, in a soothing tone.

"She promised to return by eleven, at the latest," answered Pauline.

"Perhaps something of importance may detain her?" suggested Florimel, anxious to elicit, if possible, the nature of the excuse which Octavia made for her absence.

"It may indeed be so," said Pauline, in a musing tone. "She went out shopping yesterday evening; and as she was passing along Oxford Street, she saw an elderly lady run over by a hackney-coach. My sister was the first to hasten to the assistance of the sufferer, who happened to live close by. Octavia accordingly aided her to reach her home; and the lady besought her to remain with her for a few hours. This request was granted; and it was past eleven when my sister returned home. This evening she thought it would be but courteous and humane to call and inquire after the patient; and as the old lady dwells entirely alone, Octavia foresaw that she would ask her to pass a little time with her. She however promised to come back by eleven at the latest; and now," added Pauline, glancing uneasily at the watch which Mrs. Smith had given her, "it is a quarter after twelve."

"My dearest Miss Clarendon," said Florimel, "there is nothing in your sister's prolonged absence to make you uneasy. I can readily understand the cause of it. The elderly lady is all alone, you tell me—and she is perhaps worse. Your sister, who is no doubt as kind-hearted as yourself, will not abandon the sufferer in such cruel circumstances; and she very naturally concludes that you will not fail to conjecture the reason of her absence."

"Oh! thank you for thus suggesting an explanation," cried Pauline, her countenance brightening up. "Yes—it must be as you suppose: at all events, I will not compel you to sit up any longer on my account."

"And as your sister is not here," said Florimel, with a palpitating heart, "there is no necessity for us to separate even though we retire to rest."

"If you do not object to take Octavia's place by my side," responded Pauline, with artless cheerfulness, "I shall be delighted to have you as a companion."

With these words, the ingenuous and unsuspecting maiden secured the front door and led the way to her bed-chamber.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VIRGIN AND THE VOLUPTUARY.

As Lord Florimel followed the beauteous Pauline up the stairs, that pang which had already smitten him, again shot through his heart: for the reader will remember that we have described him as being by no means naturally deficient in generous sentiments;—and now that his atrocious perfidy seemed to be approaching its consummation, those finer feelings that lay crushed and subdued beneath the influence of voluptuous passions and selfish desires, suddenly put forth a latent power. But it was when he crossed the threshold of the virgin sanctuary and the door of the bed-chamber was closed behind him,—it was *then* that his remorse became invested with a horror such as he had never known nor experienced before.

Sinking upon a chair, he pressed his hand to his brow as if to steady the thoughts that were racking his brain: and Pauline, observing his emotion, though very far from suspecting the cause, smoothed down his hair with the unpremeditated manner of one who offers a tender sympathy,—observing at the same time, "My poor friend, you feel unhappy at the idea of passing the night beneath a stranger's roof."

These words, falling upon the ears of the young nobleman in all the silver melody of Pauline's sweet voice, and the simultaneous contact of her warm hand which swept over his forehead, produced an effect upon him as if lightning had been suddenly poured into his veins: and, taking that hand, he pressed it to his lips in the rapture of a passion which the unsuspicious maiden believed to be a grateful friendship.

"No, my dearest Pauline," he said,—"for you will permit me to call you by your Christian name, as I must henceforth be Gabrielle to you,—I am not unhappy on account of this temporary absence from home: indeed, I rejoice at the incident, disagreeable in itself though it were, which drove me to seek an asylum beneath this roof—inasmuch as it has made me acquainted with you. We have not known each other quite six hours—and I already feel that I love you as a sister."

"We will be friends, Gabrielle," responded the artless Pauline. "I have often longed to possess a sincere and dear friend—one of about my own age, and whom I could take a fancy to at first sight: for as my sister's ideas and thoughts so completely correspond with my own, we never have anything now to say to each other—no little confidences to impart—no advice mutually to seek——"

"I understand you, my dear Pauline," interrupted Florimel, enchanted at the turn which the conversation was taking; "and I can assure you that I have often felt just as you describe. Yes—I have longed to form a friendship with some young lady of about my own age——"

"How old are you, Gabrielle?" asked Miss Clarendon.

"Guess," returned Florimel, smiling in his sweetest manner.

Pauline surveyed the disguised nobleman attentively for nearly a minute, and then said. "I should conceive you to be about one-and-twenty.

"No—I am only nineteen," answered Florimel, determined to make his years correspond as closely as possible with those of his lovely companion.

"That is exactly my age!" exclaimed Pauline, with a delight so frank and real that it was almost childish. "Yes—yes," she continued, in the same joyous tone, "we will be friends—bosom friends, Gabrielle—will we not?"

"Till death!" replied the nobleman. "And now let us seal our friendship with a kiss."

Pauline bent down to him as he still remained seated on the chair; and as she pressed her moist lips to his, he could scarcely prevent himself from flinging his arms around her and straining her to his breast

"Now let us think about retiring to rest," said Pauline; "and we will talk ourselves to sleep," she added gaily.

With these words she proceeded to lay aside her gown; and when Florimel beheld her lovely form set off in all its fine contours by the corset that rather took its shape from those charms than gave any symmetrical improvement to them, his passion was inflamed almost beyond the power of control. Burning desire struggling with a consciousness of the paramount necessity of prudence—an intense fervour raging in spite of the certainty that any abrupt declaration of his sex would ruin his project—an ardent longing to throw himself at her feet, proclaim his love, and implore her to have pity upon him,—such was the turmoil of emotions that now agitated within the breast of Lord Florimel!

Placing herself before the glass, and having her back turned towards him, Pauline began to arrange her hair for the night. Having unloosed the shining masses, which now flowed in silken waves over her naked shoulders, she combed out that luxuriant covering which might have been envied by the proudest empress that ever wore a diadem upon her brow.

"My sweet Pauline," said Florimel, impatient to give their conversation such a turn that he might gradually prepare the maiden's mind, as it were, for the *denouement* of this adventure, "is it not strange that we should have experienced precisely the same views and the same thoughts relative to the necessity of a sincere and tender friendship in order to complete our happiness?"

"It proves that our dispositions are congenial, and that there exists a strong sympathy between us, Gabrielle," returned Pauline.

"And yet perhaps the ideas and reflections of one of us have been more developed by circumstances than those of the other," observed Florimel.

"I do not understand you, my sweet friend," said Pauline, who was still occupied in combing out her beautiful hair before the glass.

"I alluded to myself," continued the young nobleman, heaving a profound sigh.

"Ah! you appear to be unhappy!" exclaimed Pauline: "and now I remember that when we first came up-stairs, something was annoying you. Have you anything preying upon your mind? If so, it were wrong to keep it a secret from me, after the vows of friendship which we have exchanged."

"You shall possess my entire confidence, dearest Pauline," said the disguised nobleman. "The first secret that I have to reveal to you is this——I love!"

"And are you unhappy on that account?" inquired the young maiden, in a tone of tender interest. "But perhaps you are not loved in return?"

"I know not," responded Florimel, throwing a deep melancholy into his voice: "I hope—and yet I fear!"

"Doubtless the object of your affection is very handsome?" said Pauline.

"Not handsome — femininely beautiful — very beautiful!" exclaimed Florimel, with all the effusion of a worship. "But tell me, my dearest friend—have you yet known what it is to love?"

"Never," answered Pauline.

"Then are you unacquainted with a source of the purest and most ineffable delight," said the youthful voluptuary: "or I should rather describe it as a deliciousness of the feelings—a paradise of the emotions——"

"Wherefore, then, are you unhappy, Gabrielle?" inquired the artless girl.

"Oh! love is a pleasing pain—or a painful pleasure—I know not how to describe it!" exclaimed Florimel. "It is something that encourages the most heavenly hopes, throughout which there nevertheless runs an under-current of fears;—and yet these fears are not exactly what you would describe as gloomy apprehensions—they are rather an exciting influence, seldom or never sinking into despondency. Thus, when I tell you that I am unhappy because I *fear*, I should likewise avow that I am happy because I *hope*; and such a strange, undefinable sentiment is love, that these contradictory feelings—these opposite sentiments are experienced by the soul at one and the same time!"

"'Tis singular—most singular," observed Pauline, in a musing tone: "and yet I think that I can fully understand what love must be."

"Friendship often ripens into love," said Florimel.

"You can scarcely say *often*, my dear Gabrielle," returned Pauline; "because it is very seldom that friendship ever subsists between a young lady and a young gentleman who are not related to each other."

"Nevertheless, such is the case with regard to myself," observed Florimel. "A sincere friendship exists between me and the object of my love."

"And on your side that friendship has already ripened into love?" said Pauline, interrogatively.

"Yes," answered the disguised nobleman; "and if it be true that love begets love, I may yet see all my hopes fulfilled and my fears dissipated."

"Heaven send that you may, my dear Gabrielle!" exclaimed Pauline, in a tone of profound sincerity. "If I were a man I am certain that I could love you deeply and tenderly—and the more so, when I learnt that you already loved me."

"And what makes you hold this opinion, which is so flattering to me?" asked Florimel, trembling all over through very joy and pleasure.

"Because you are beautiful—extremely beautiful," said Pauline, turning round towards him: "and because you are so amiable—and good—and pleasing in your manners. Do you think, my dear Gabrielle, that I should have conceived so sudden

friendship for you if you were not all that I represent? Oh! I am sure that you will be happy in the affection that you have formed—for to know you is to love you!"

"Dearest Pauline," murmured Florimel, in a tremulous tone, "I may repeat all your own words and apply them to yourself—for to know you is to love you also!"

"We will love each other as very sincere friends," said the young maiden; and while she was thus giving utterance to words that were the outpourings of her artless and ingenuous soul, she was simultaneously laying aside further portions of her dress—until she stood in a state of semi-nudity in the presence of the disguised nobleman, who was a prey to such varied and conflicting emotions that he was riveted as it were to his seat.

"Yes—we will love each other as sincere friends," he said, his voice so full of profound feeling that the beauteous, unsuspecting Pauline was touched to the very soul by its soft and melodious tone; and throwing her arms round the traitor's neck, she imprinted a fervent kiss upon his forehead.

But how did Florimel restrain his feelings now?—how exercise the least control over a passion that was excited almost to madness? For by the young maiden's movement, his very countenance was brought in contact with her virgin bosom—and her naked arms encircled him.

"O Pauline—Pauline," he exclaimed, "you know not how much I love you!"

"It affords me an indescribable pleasure to receive that assurance," said the charming girl, now withdrawing her arms from his neck, and again approaching the toilette-table.

"But can you conjecture wherefore I love you so ardently?—can you divine wherefore I could fall down and worship you?" asked Florimel, in an impassioned tone; then without waiting for a reply, he said, "It is not only because you are so beautiful and good—but it is also because you are the living counterpart of the object of my affections. Oh! if you and I love each other thus sincerely, would it not be a joyous event if some fairy could suddenly start up from the floor, and change one of us into a being of the opposite sex?"

"O Gabrielle, what a strange idea!" exclaimed Pauline, turning round towards her companion, with a sudden feeling of uneasiness springing up in her soul.

"Nay—do not reproach me, my angelic friend," cried Florimel. "You will find that I am a romantic creature, fond of giving my imagination full play, and at times somewhat dreamy and visionary. But you will bear with me in that, Pauline—you will not chide your friend on this account! Suffer me to indulge in the delicious thoughts in the stream of which my soul was being gently borne along, and whose current leads amidst flowery scenes to the very portals of elysium. I was conjuring up a beatific vision when you interrupted me:—I was fancying that if all we have read of fairies and good genii could possibly be true, how delightful were it if one of that powerful race would suddenly appear before us—touch me with a magic wand—and say, '*Thou adorest Pauline—become a man—throw thyself at her feet—and claim her as thy wife!*'"

"Gabrielle—I implore you not to continue in this strain," cried Pauline, gazing strangely upon the flushed cheeks and flashing eyes of her companion. "You terrify me—I know not why;—and yet a vague apprehension—a feeling of increasing uneasiness has come over——"

"Give not way to these idle fears, my beauteous friend," interrupted Florimel, whose looks were fixed upon the bosom of the virgin whom he sought to make his victim: "do you think it possible that my vision can be realized? And even if it were, Pauline, should you be vexed?—should you be annoyed? Ere now you told me that you had never yet experienced the passion of love; and I assured you, in reply, that earth's greatest happiness was, in that case, still unknown to you. But you have declared your friendship for me—and I have proved to you that friendship itself ripens into love. Now, suppose for a moment that the fairy could come forth—could touch me with a wand—could change my sex—and could endow me with a proud name and a colossal fortune,—suppose all this, my sweet Pauline,—and then imagine that you saw me at your feet—that I declared my fervent and unalterable love—that I implored you to become my wife, the partner of my rank and the sharer of my wealth,—tell me, my dearest, Pauline, what would your answer be?"

Gradually as the young nobleman thus developed a theory which was in itself more or less a revelation,—a suspicion, at first faint as the ringing of far-distant bells in the ear, rose up in the mind of Miss Clarendon: then, as the idea which had flashed to her brain received confirmation from the concluding words of the nobleman, her countenance became convulsed with terror—a faint shriek escaped her lips—she staggered a few paces towards the window, her impulse being to open it and cry for help—but her limbs failed her, and she sank almost insensible upon a chair.

Florimel sprang from his seat—threw himself on his knees before her—and endeavoured to take her hand. But, with the instinctive prompting of virgin modesty, Pauline crossed her arms over her bosom;—and, bending a look full of mournful reproach upon nobleman, she said, "You are not what you seem! Tell me who you are, and the purpose which has brought you hither?"

"Adorable Pauline," exclaimed Florimel, "the fairy has accomplished the task—and it is a devoted lover who kneels at your feet!"

The young maiden started from the chair. A profound sense of danger inspired her with sudden energy; and seizing a shawl, she hastily threw it over her shoulders, wrapping it across her bosom; then, drawing herself up to the full height of her noble stature, while her countenance, losing its expression of alarm, assumed a sovereign dignity alike interesting and imposing, she said, "Whoever you may be, I command you to leave me this moment!"

"Sooner than thus quit you—sooner than leave you mortally offended against me," cried Florimel, who had risen from his suppliant posture at the same moment that Pauline started from her seat, —"I will commit suicide in your presence! My God, have pity upon me! I love—I adore you, —Pauline—and your indignation, if unappeased, will reduce me to despair."

"It is impossible that this interview can be prolonged," said the young maiden, her tone becoming a trifle less severe and her countenance losing a small portion of its inflexibility. "I again command you to leave me—as the only condition on which you may ever hope to obtain my pardon for this black treachery and cowardly outrage."

"Your words are cutting—too cutting, Miss Clarendon," exclaimed the nobleman, with quivering lips: then, in a sudden access of generous fervour, he hastily added, "But I deserve all that you can say to me—yes, I deserve it all! My conduct has indeed been treacherously black—and the outrage was cowardly. Yes—yes—you are right, beauteous maiden—and I am a villain!"

"Prove your contrition by leaving me instantaneously," ejaculated Pauline, whose gentle soul was secretly moved to pity the handsome—or rather beautiful youth whom she had already begun to love sincerely while believing that her new friend's attire was suited to the sex.

"My God! can nothing induce you to pardon me?" cried Florimel, whose agitation and excitement were very far from being feigned—inasmuch as the noble and dignified bearing of the young virgin had commanded his respect; and when such an impression is made upon a man of naturally generous feelings, remorse and compunction are certain to follow under such circumstances as those which we are detailing. "Pauline—adored Pauline," he exclaimed, clasping his hands: "hear me for a few moments! The fame of your beauty reached me—never mind by what means—and I was already in love with you before I saw you. I resolved to become acquainted with you; and my object has been thus far attained. I have outraged you—I have treated you in a manner which you have denounced in the terms properly applying to such behaviour;—and now I beseech and implore you not to cherish a lasting indignation against me! On the contrary, dearest—dearest Pauline, on my knees do I pray you to accord a single syllable of hope to the wretched being who has thus merited your anger. Or, stay—one word more," exclaimed the young nobleman, suddenly drawing himself up as he was about to sink at the maiden's feet;—"you know not who I am—but I solemnly and sacredly offer you my hand

in honourable marriage—for you are the first woman that ever yet made upon my soul an impression which in its very symptoms is far different from a passing caprice or an evanescent passion. Say, then, my beloved Pauline,—say—will you consent to become the partner of my rank and fortune?—will you change your own sweet name of Clarendon for that of Lady Florimel?"

"Who are you?" inquired the maiden, bewildered and amazed. "Speak!—and deceive me not!"

"I am Lord Florimel—but still *Gabriel* to you," answered the young nobleman.

At that moment a post-chaise drove up to the front of the house; and Pauline, hastily putting aside the window-curtain, looked forth into the road.

"Gracious heaven! 'tis my father!" she exclaimed, in accents of despair, as she turned once more towards Florimel: then clasping her hands together in indescribable anguish, she murmured, "Octavia is not at home—and I——"

"Courage!—reassure yourself!" hastily interrupted Florimel. "In the name of everything sacred, I implore you to be calm, and all shall be well!"

"But how?—what can we do?" demanded Pauline, now suddenly struck with a sense of her complete dependence upon the young nobleman to save her honour from even the faintest suspicion on the part of her father. "What can we do, I ask?" she repeated: for at that moment a loud double-knock at the door resounded through the house.

"Again I say, compose yourself," exclaimed the nobleman, speaking collectedly though with the haste occasioned by the urgency of the circumstances. "Listen to me attentively."

"I do—I do," interrupted Pauline, trembling all over like a timid dove.

"You have *two* aims to accomplish," continued Florimel; "the first is to screen yourself from suspicion—the second to save your sister from suspicion likewise."

"My God! what do you mean?" demanded the maiden, gazing in bewilderment upon her companion.

"I mean that your father will be angry if he should learn that your sister passes the night away from the house," returned Florimel, impressively. "This is what you must do—make him believe that Octavia is *here*—and prevent him from entering the chamber. Now go——"

At this instant the knocking was repeated; and Pauline, hastily enveloping herself in a cloak, hurried down stairs to open the door.

CHAPTER XX.

A NIGHT AT THE VILLA.

MR. CLARENDON was about fifty-four years of age,—tall in person, and of aristocratic appearance. His countenance was severe and even haughty in expression; and yet there was an indelible stamp of melancholy upon the lofty brow. His face was thin—his features were sharp and angular—and his complexion was sallow. His eyes were small, dark, and steadfast in their look: they were not piercing—and yet, when their gaze fell fully upon the countenance of an individual, they seemed capable of reading his very soul. His hair was of an iron grey deepening into blackness—or rather retaining its pristine hue at the whiskers, which were thin but dark: his lips were small and usually compressed, as if he were accustomed to long intervals of profound thought;—and care had traced its lines on either side of his mouth.

Somewhat spare in person, his figure was nevertheless well knit and genteel: and though it was slightly bowed, the cause was the same that had left the shade upon his forehead and had marked the wrinkles on his countenance. For his was one of those vigorous constitutions and iron frames which appear to defy the lapse of years, and which Time, as if resolved not to be defeated in its universal ravages, had therefore employed Sorrow to undermine.

We have already stated that he had done his duty as a good father towards his motherless daughters; and he loved them tenderly. It was true that misfortunes had somewhat soured his temper, and rendered him easy to be irritated: but he seldom spoke unnecessarily a sharp word to his children;—or if he did, he made amends by a deeper demonstration of affection afterwards. Naturally taciturn and reserved, he was accustomed to pass hours together in the seclusion of his own chamber; and thus the young ladies were left much to themselves and thrown upon their own resources for recreation. In a word, they were what may be termed "their own mistresses;" and even in their walks Mr. Clarendon seldom accompanied them. He entertained the fullest confidence in their propriety of conduct; and their very artlessness and inexperience were in his estimation the best proofs that his reliance upon their prudence had not been misplaced.

Having recorded these few observations, we resume the thread of our narrative.

Pauline had taken the candle with her; and Florimel was accordingly left in the dark in the maiden's bed-chamber.

She descended the stairs with precipitate haste, and opened the front door. In another moment she was clasped in the arms of her father, who exclaimed, "I have welcome news for you, dearest Pauline. But you did not expect me home so soon perhaps—nor yet at such an unseasonable hour?"

"Oh! I am rejoiced that you have returned in safety, dear father," responded the affectionate daughter, for an instant forgetting in the delight of this meeting the embarrassing circumstances in which she was placed with regard to Florimel on the one hand and her sister on the other.

The postilion now brought Mr. Clarendon's trunk into the house; and that gentleman, having paid for the hire of the vehicle in which he had travelled, entered the front parlour with his daughter.

"You will take some refreshment, dear father?" she exclaimed, observing that he looked fatigued—although his countenance was happier in expression than she had ever before known it to be.

"Nothing, Pauline, thank you. I am only wearied in consequence of a tedious journey," he continued: "for the roads are execrable with the thaw that has set in—and hence the lateness of the hour at which I have arrived. But how is my dear Octavia?"

"She is well—quite well, dear father," answered the young maiden, feeling that her countenance became scarlet and then suddenly pale as she spoke, for it appeared to her as if she were already uttering a falsehood—or at all events deceiving her sire with an equivocation.

"She is asleep, no doubt—and I will not disturb her to-night," said Mr. Clarendon, who at the instant was divesting himself of his cloak and shawl-kerchief and did not therefore perceive his daughter's emotions. "I was as much surprised as rejoiced when I saw a light in your bed-chamber—for I thereby felt assured that you had not as yet retired to rest, and that consequently I should not have to awaken you. But I suppose that you have burnt a candle all night in your own room during my absence?"

"And yet we are not very timid, you know, dear father," said Pauline evasively: and again did she blush at the part which she was playing. "But you told me that you had welcome news?" she exclaimed, anxious to turn the conversation.

"Yes—Lord Marchmont has behaved well at last," replied Mr. Clarendon. "However, I will tell you everything in the morning—or rather a few hours hence, for 'tis already long past midnight. I am myself wearied—and I will not keep you longer out of your warm bed."

Thus speaking, Mr. Clarendon embraced his daughter—took the candle which she offered him—and proceeded up-stairs to his bed-chamber, which was in readiness for his reception.

Pauline obtained another light; and with trembling limbs and palpitating heart she returned to her own room, whence she had been absent about a quarter of an hour.

But during that interval a great change had taken place in the sentiments of Lord Florimel. He had relapsed from the chivalrous noble into the selfish voluptuary and his imagination had become inflamed with ardent desires as he dwelt upon the charms of the young maiden—those virgin charms which, in her unsuspecting artlessness, she had revealed to his eyes! He smiled when he recollected that enthusiastic admiration of her innocence and virtue, into which a sudden ebullition of generous feeling had hurried him, even to the point of offering her his hand; and the more he mentally gloated upon the loveliness of Pauline, the less scrupulous did he become in his intentions with regard to her. At length, almost maddened with the fervent thoughts that thus superseded the nobler sentiments which he had for a few moments entertained, he vowed to possess her at all risks, and to sacrifice her honour to his passion in spite of all the obstacles which her virtue might throw in his way!

Such was the state of his mind, when she reappeared:—and, although she was enveloped in that ample cloak which she had thrown on ere she descended to open the front door for her father, his imagination nevertheless retained a vivid impression of the white neck, beauteous shoulders, and well-rounded bosom which a short time previously were fully unveiled to the unsuspected licentiousness of his gaze.

The maiden placed the candle upon the table—drew the folds of the cloak as completely around her erect form as possible—and seating herself in a chair close to that which Florimel occupied, bent upon him a look so full of earnest appeal that a remorseful pang once more shot through his heart.

"My lord," she said, in the lowest tone to which her dulcet voice was capable of falling without becoming actually inaudible, "you are beneath the roof of an honest man:—respect his daughter, who feels that she is so entirely dependent upon your honour and your mercy."

Florimel contemplated her lovely countenance with eyes brimful of passion: but he knew not how to reply to the appealing words which she had addressed to him.

"Not half-an-hour has elapsed," continued Pauline, now casting down her looks, while a carnation glow suffused her cheeks, "since your lordship honoured me by a proposal which was well calculated to win my forgiveness for the perfidious conduct which preceded it. But to that offer your lordship will insist upon no reply at present. Perhaps, indeed, your lordship may wish to have leisure to reconsider it," she said, her voice becoming tremulous; "and therefore ——"

"No, my adored Pauline," interrupted Florimel who hoped by fostering her belief in his honourable intentions that he should more easily accomplish his evil aims;—"I cannot desire to have time for reflection on that head. I love you—I adore you ——"

"This is language which, under present circumstances, I dare not listen to," interrupted the girl, firmly and proudly. "Ere now your lordship evinced a generous spirit: do not—oh! do not destroy the confidence wherewith you thus inspired me! For it was through this confidence, that I yielded to the alternative of deceiving my father instead of looking him full in the face and revealing all the incidents of the last few hours. And, oh! I blush—I feel ashamed of the duplicity of which I was guilty, when he asked for Octavia and I suffered him to believe that she was here! It was the first time that I ever deceived my father," she added mournfully: "and it shall be the last!"

"Remember, Pauline," observed Florimel, "that you have saved your sister from those suspicions which Mr. Clarendon would have inevitably entertained concerning her absence."

"But wherefore should he think ill of his own child?" demanded Pauline impatiently, though still in a low whispering tone—for her sire's bed-chamber joined that wherein this colloquy took place. "Octavia would explain in the morning the cause of that absence ——"

"No, my dearest girl," interrupted Florimel, suddenly resolving upon a new and most iniquitous expedient in order to obtain a victory over the maiden's honour: namely, by exciting her imagination with voluptuous images and conjuring up soft desires in her virgin mind:—"no, dearest girl—Octavia will *not* be able to give a satisfactory account of her long absence from home."

"Great heaven! what do you mean, my lord?" asked Pauline, for an instant yielding to the terror with which these ominous words inspired her: but almost immediately recovering her self-possession, she said with a tone and manner of mingled indignation and pride, "Your lordship dares not asperse the honour of my sister."

"Is this a time—is this a place—or are these the circumstances, for us to veil our thoughts, or shut our eyes against palpable truths?" demanded Florimel. "I declare most solemnly, Pauline, that I would not wilfully wound your feelings: but I must speak to you as if I were your friend—or your brother—or your husband. Listen, then—and endeavour to exercise the strongest control over your emotions."

"Go on—go on," murmured the young maiden, frightened by the impressiveness of his manner and

the confidence with which he was evidently touching upon a delicate subject.

"Your sister is in love!" he said, at the same time holding up his taper fore-finger to enjoin the maiden to forbear from giving vent to the feeling of astonishment which this announcement was so well calculated to raise up in her bosom.

"In love?" she repeated, mechanically. "Impossible!"

"Sweet simpleton that thou art, my Pauline!" returned Lord Florimel, smiling. "Is it so very wonderful that Octavia should be in love?—for are not you yourself already in love likewise—and with me?"

"My lord! my lord! this pleasantry is cruel!" began Pauline, her countenance expressing mingled impatience, anger, and curiosity.

"By heaven! I never was more serious in my life, sweet girl," answered Florimel. "However, to return to your sister—I tell you that she is in love, and that she has deceived you, with absurd excuses for her absence."

"Oh! if I thought that this could be true!" murmured Pauline, bursting into tears. "But no—no," she exclaimed, wiping away those crystal drops that were tracing their pearly path down her beauteous cheeks: "Octavia would not refuse me her confidence—much less deceive me."

"One word, Pauline," said Florimel, gazing upon her with a mixture of tenderness and archness which rendered his countenance beautifully soft and feminine in expression at that moment, so that even the maiden herself, much as her mind was pre-occupied, felt her heart irresistibly attracted towards him,—"one word, Pauline!" he repeated: "and now answer me truly. When Octavia returns home in the morning, shall you frankly and unreservedly reveal to her all the incidents that have occurred during her absence?"

A blush mounted rapidly up to the virgin's pure and spotless brow; and she cast down her looks at the same time:—then, after a long pause, she raised her eyes timidly, observing in a tremulous voice, "I can understand *now* that it is possible for even the innocent and guileless heart to cherish secrets of a certain nature."

"You believe, then, at length, that it is quite probable for your sister to be in love, and yet not confess her passion to you?" said Lord Florimel. "Yes, Pauline, dearest—she is indeed in love;—and her lover," he added, in a melting tone and with a plaintive look, "sighs not vainly at her feet as I have been doomed this night to humble myself at yours."

"I dare not give way to the suspicion which your words have conjured up!" murmured Pauline, covering her face with her hands as if to shut out some unpleasant object from her view.

"You are passing from a state of complete innocence with regard to the world, into the noviciate of experience," said Florimel; "and you will be happier, Pauline—Oh! far happier, when there is nothing left for you to learn. Already has Octavia passed the boundary which separated her from the true enjoyments of this life—and in the arms of him whom she adores she tastes the ineffable bliss and the elysian delights of love."

"No more—no more!" exclaimed Pauline, a strange tremor agitating her entire frame.

"Hush!" whispered Florimel, "remember that your father is in the next room!"

"My father!" repeated Pauline, with a shudder. "What will he say—what will be his feelings, when my lost and unhappy sister returns home in the morning, if indeed she should ever come back again."

"Fear not—she will return," said Florimel.

"Then your lordship knows more than you have already told me?" exclaimed the maiden, her excitement every instant increasing: "you are aware of much—Oh! far too much—concerning my sister? Perhaps you were even assured beforehand that she would not come back to-night?" added Pauline, now calling to mind the readiness with which he had invented excuses in order to tranquillise her fears relative to the prolonged absence of Octavia.

"I will not attempt to conceal from you, my angel——" began Florimel.

"Again I command you, my lord, to refrain from language which it ill becomes me to hear," interrupted Pauline, recovering her maiden dignity once more.

"Then you do not love me!" said the nobleman, assuming a plaintive tone.

"Oh! I could love you—I could serve you on my bended knees—I could become your slave," returned Pauline, relapsing suddenly into a state of painful excitement, as different emotions swayed her soul, even as an Æolian harp oscillates to every variety of the breeze:—"yes—and I should look upon you as a guardian angel," she added, with a feverish gleaming in those eyes usually so soft and melting,—"if you were to save my sister from incurring our father's suspicions — our father's wrath!"

"What would you have me do?" asked Florimel, his breast a prey to desires which were almost maddening, as he contemplated the lovely girl: for in the agitation that had latterly seized upon her, and when she covered her face with her hands, as she now recovered, she had thrust her naked arms forth from beneath the ample cloak, and the licentious voluptuary was enabled to feast his eyes upon those arms so white and round.

"What would I have you do?" she repeated, suddenly noticing the disordered condition of her *deshabillee*, and once more gathering the folds of the mantle round her lovely form: "I would have you—if your lordship really loves me—save my sister's fault from being discovered by her father. You know where she is at this moment—I am sure that you are not ignorant on this head? No—everything you have said regarding her, convinces me that I err not in this belief! 'Tis for you, then, Lord Florimel——"

"Call me Gabriel," interjectured the nobleman, now fancying that the maiden was rapidly falling into his power.

"Yes—I will call you Gabriel—my dear friend Gabriel," repeated Pauline, emphatically; for she was ready to do almost anything in order to screen her sister: "and I will never—never forget your kindness, if you will serve me in this instance. It is for you, I say, to quit this house as speedily and as cautiously as possible—to repair to the place where you know my sister to be—to insist upon obtaining an interview with her to tell her that our father has returned suddenly, and almost unexpectedly—and to compel her to hasten home ere he shall have descended from his chamber in the morning. And

you must also assure her that I, on my part, will leave nothing unattempted or undone in order to cover her secret with an impenetrable veil. Now, my dear Gabriel, will you do all this for me——"

"And my reward, Pauline?—what shall be my reward?" exclaimed the nobleman, extending his arms towards her.

But a sudden change came over the young maiden: all her agitation—all her excitement abandoned her in a moment,—sinking down into a cold astonishment, if we may be allowed the expression;—or, in other and more explicit terms, the generous fervour of her reliance and the ingenuous warmth of her confidence in respect to Lord Florimel, received such an instantaneous shock, that she gazed upon him with the freezing hauteur of disdain and contempt, and also with the steadfastness of surprise at that abrupt and unexpected manifestation of his intense selfishness.

"You do not love me, my lord," she at length observed, in a tone indicative of profound disappointment: "nor do you even entertain the slightest particle of friendship towards me."

"Unkind Pauline! wherefore thus plant a dagger in my heart?" demanded Florimel.

"I have been deceived in you—cruelly deceived," resumed the maiden, drawing back her chair a few paces, and waving her hand imperiously to forbid the nobleman from daring to approach her: then, again wrapping her mantle closely around her, she said, "I had already forgotten the treachery with which our interview this night commenced on your side—because the discovery of that perfidious conduct was succeeded by an interval of apparent generosity on your part. Yes—I was willing to pardon the behaviour which, at one time in the course of these long hours that we have passed together, I stigmatised as black and cowardly: I was willing to forget it, on account of the contrition that your lordship seemed to manifest. And, oh! I now indeed perceive," she added bitterly, "that I am passing from a state of complete innocence with regard to the world, into the noviciate of experience—and the first fruits of this new study are sour enough, I can assure you! I thought to trust you as a friend—to confide in you as—as——"

And here her voice became suddenly choked with emotions.

"As a lover—as a husband!" Lord Florimel hastened to add. "Oh! do not lose all confidence in me, my adored one," he continued, speaking from the depths of a heart which remorse had again touched: for there was something in the dignified reproaches of Pauline that overawed the youthful libertine and compelled him to gaze upon his own selfishness in all its most ghastly and repulsive shades.

"Let me be candid with you, Lord Florimel," said Pauline, who had herself undergone such a variety of feelings and emotions during the last few hours, that she received therefrom many rapidly acquired teachings in the school of experience, and from the same source had drawn an inspiration enabling her to read the more profoundly into the true character and disposition of her noble companion: "let me be candid with you, Lord Florimel," she said. "A veil has fallen from my eyes—a light has dawned in upon my soul—and I already see many things differently from the view I had been accustomed to take of them. I can even understand how love may lead to error—and I pity rather than blame my unfortunate sister. Oh! yes—I feel how weak is woman, and how strong are the temptations which she has to resist. Nay—I have this night experienced those sensations which prove to me beyond all doubt that I likewise am weak, and that there have been moments during our interview when I was standing upon the verge of a precipice. But the sense of that very weakness, Lord Florimel, shall henceforth constitute my strength: a full and perfect comprehension of the dangers which beset my path, shall supply a rigid and unvarying prudence for any lack of strictly virtuous principles within me. Learn, then, that if your lordship should renew those honourable proposals which you ere now made, I feel that I can love you—aye, and devotedly: but if your lordship should dare to utter a word or make a gesture calculated to insult me, I will that moment seek refuge with my father—throw myself at his feet—confess all that has occurred—and leave *him* to punish you."

It is scarcely possible to convey an adequate idea of the effect produced on the young nobleman by this long, impressive, and dignified address. Here was a lovely virgin, of tender age, proclaiming her own weakness—acknowledging her own deficiency in that deeply-rooted principle of female virtue which a mother's delicate teachings and familiar inculcations can alone implant in the bosom of girlhood,—and yet boldly assuring her lover, into whose treacherous designs she had fully penetrated, that the very sense of her own liability to fall should be converted by her strength of mind into a fortalice of defence!

Again was his soul stricken with remorse—again did a feeling of fervent admiration spring up within him—and again did a chivalrous enthusiasm take possession of him in respect to that bright and beauteous being whose conduct was so well calculated to win the approval of a generous heart.

"Pauline—my beloved Pauline," he murmured, in a contrite tone, "you have worked a great and signal change within me. On my knees—yes, on my knees—do I implore your pardon for all that has been bad and wicked in my behaviour towards you this night."

And Gabriel sank into a suppliant posture before her as he thus spoke.

The amiable but strong-minded girl extended her hand, which he took in both his own and pressed respectfully to his lips; and she did not attempt to withdraw it. For that same experience—or rather intuitive knowledge—which had so suddenly made her sensible of the excellence of female virtue and the dangers that surrounded it, also prevented her from falling into the extreme of a ridiculous prudery.

"Do not kneel to me, my lord," she said, in a kind and encouraging tone. "Remember, I am but a humble girl—and you are a great nobleman."

"And my pride shall be to make a great lady of you, adorable Pauline," responded Florimel, as he rose from his suppliant posture and resumed his chair. "And now tell me what you wish me to do—or rather, give me your instructions, and I will obey them."

"Oh! how well could I think of your sex, were you always to adopt this demeanour towards me," exclaimed Pauline. "Now do I recognise in you everything generous, and noble, and good, which properly belongs to man."

"If I be thus changed, Pauline," said Florimel,

in a tone of sincerity, "it is your bright example that has worked so salutary an effect."

"Dear Gabriel, you know not how it delights me to hear you speak in language characterised by truthfulness and candour. You are far—oh! far handsomer, now that your features are expressive of frankness and sincerity, than when your words were fraught with guile and deceit."

"You feel, then, that you can love me, sweet Pauline?" asked the nobleman, a pure and holy delight imparting ecstatic sensations to his soul.

"As unreservedly as I declare that I shall hate you if your present behaviour change towards me, do I confess that I can love you with all my heart—even to the laying down of my life for your sake—if your real character should prove to be as I now read it."

This response commenced with a dignity that bore the most unequivocal testimony to the strength of the maiden's virtuous resolves, and concluded with a tenderness which showed that her gentle heart was indeed susceptible of a pure and honourable love.

"Never again, dearest Pauline," observed Florimel, "shall you have cause to reproach me. And now issue your commands—that I may show my zeal and readiness in obeying them."

"You will undertake to do all I have asked in reference to my sister—my poor, lost, fallen Octavia?" said the maiden, her voice becoming tremulous with emotion.

"I swear to accomplish your wishes," replied Florimel.

"It is now nearly two o'clock in the morning," continued Pauline, after referring to her watch. "Doubtless my father is asleep—he was much wearied when he retired to rest an hour ago—and you can descend the stairs so cautiously that he will not be disturbed. At all events the trial must be made—the risk must be incurred."

Then, without any affectation of prudery,—but with a charming readiness which implied the full extent of the confidence that the maiden now placed not only in her own virtue but likewise in the altered sentiments of her lover,—Pauline hastened to put the gipsey hat on Florimel's head and tie the ribands beneath his chin. She then assisted him to resume his ample shawl, which she herself fastened for him over his chest: and when these arrangements were completed, she observed, with an arch smile, "The next time that I have the pleasure of seeing you, my dear Gabriel, you will have the kindness to appear in the costume befitting your sex."

"You will permit me to call again soon—very soon?" said Florimel, interrogatively.

"With pleasure," was the candid reply. "But upon what pretence can you visit the house? And remember that when you do come, we must appear before my father as if we had not been previously acquainted."

"He is a relative of Lord Marchmont, I believe?" observed Florimel, after a few moments' reflection. "That nobleman is a friend of mine, and I can procure an introduction from him to Mr. Clarendon. But what explanation am I to give to your sister?"

"Precisely the same that I shall offer," responded Pauline. "I shall tell her that you came hither in disguise, and with a treacherous intention towards myself—that I detected your perfidy, and remonstrated with you upon your conduct, appealing to your generosity and your honour to depart forthwith—and that you expressed so much sincere contrition as to obtain my pardon. You then informed me that accident had made you acquainted with my sister's indiscretion, and that I implored you to rescue her from the perils into which she had fallen. But you need not say that you passed two hours with me in this chamber," added Pauline, with a dignified frankness of tone and manner, although a blush suffused her cheeks at the same time; "because, inasmuch as Octavia herself has yielded to temptation, it were perhaps difficult for me to escape a suspicion on her part."

"And yet, if I inform her that her father has returned home, and that his arrival took place in the middle of the night,—or rather, at an early hour in the morning," said Florimel, "she will wonder where I could have been concealed all that time."

"True!" exclaimed Pauline, now much embarrassed. "And yet it is absolutely necessary that she should be prepared beforehand to meet our father," she added, in a musing tone. "Oh! it is repugnant to my feelings to deal in duplicity and deceit: nevertheless, I could not endure the idea of being suspected even by my own sister——"

"Permit me to suggest an expedient," interrupted Florimel, who saw that the whole and sole difficulty to be cleared away was the fact that he had been introduced into the maiden's bed-chamber. "I will tell your sister that my interview with you took place in one parlour, and that when your father arrived you conducted him into another."

"Gabriel, I thank you for this delicacy—this generosity on your part," exclaimed Pauline, taking his hand and pressing it tenderly for an instant. "We have now no more to say to each other,—unless it be that on my side I must enjoin you to adopt such measures as to ensure the return of Octavia before eight o'clock this morning—or all will be lost!"

"You may rely upon me, my beloved Pauline," answered Florimel.

The maiden then cautiously opened the door—and the two descended the stairs together as noiselessly as possible.

When they gained the passage below, they paused and listened. All was silent; and, reassured by the certainty that her father slept, Pauline opened the street-door.

"Farewell, sweetest—loveliest girl," said Florimel, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Farewell," murmured the maiden, in an equally subdued tone.

Their lips met for a moment—the soft sound of a billing kiss broke upon the solemn silence of the night—and in another instant the front door was closed noiselessly behind the disguised nobleman.

Pauline succeeded in regaining her chamber without disturbing Mr. Clarendon; and she retired to rest for a few hours. But the sleep that fell upon her eyes was uneasy and restless—for even in her dreams was she haunted by fears lest her sister's absence throughout the entire night should be discovered by her father.

And in those dreams did not the image of the handsome Gabriel appear to the maiden?

We believe so!

CHAPTER XXI.

CAROLINE WALTERS.

It will be remembered that Lord Florimel had by some means or other acquired the certainty that Octavia Clarendon would not return home until the morning. The fact was that when Mrs. Brace was occupied in dressing the young nobleman in the female attire suited to the evening's adventure, she had said to him, "You have now the whole night before you, Florimel: for Octavia's lover ere now intimated to me his desire that she should sleep here with him—and as her timidity may perhaps engender some scruples on this score, measures will be taken to enforce her compliance with her gallant's wishes. It is fortunate that the gentleman should have been seized with this caprice, inasmuch as it ensures your lordship an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with the lovely Pauline."

It was this speech on the part of Mrs. Brace that gave the nobleman the certainty above referred to.

As soon as he had quitted Pall Mall in his feminine disguise, the milliner rang the bell; and her lady's-maid—a handsome young woman of about twenty—answered the summons.

"Harriet," said Mrs. Brace, waiting ere she spoke until the dependant had closed the door, "I have some very particular instructions to give you. In the first place, Mr. Harley intends to remain here all night with Miss Clarendon; and he has commanded supper to be served up at ten o'clock precisely. You will of course order the cook to provide the choicest delicacies; and you will wait at table yourself—receiving the dishes on the landing outside from the footman. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, madam," was the respectful answer.

"Now take this key," continued Mrs. Brace, handing to the lady's-maid the object alluded to: "it belongs to the side-board in the room where Mr. Harley and Miss Clarendon now are; and at supper-time you will place upon the table, close to *his* right hand, the decanter of wine which you will find in that side-board. You comprehend?"

"Certainly, madam," again responded the lady's-maid. "Have you any farther commands."

"None. Oh! stay—I remember!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, suddenly recollecting a little commission which had been entrusted to her: and taking a letter from behind the ornaments on the mantel, she said, "Mr. Harley wrote this just now and ordered that it should be sent to Mr. Meagles' lodgings in the course of the evening. You will direct the footman to take it forthwith up to Jermyn Street."

"Yes, madam;"—and the abigail was about to withdraw, when Mrs. Brace again stopped her.

"You may tell Miss Walters that I am now ready to depart with her," she said, glancing at the timepiece and observing that it was a quarter past six o'clock; "and she can bring me down my bonnet and cloak. You will likewise order a coach to be sent for."

"To the shop-door, madam?" inquired Harriet.

"Certainly!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace. "Am I in the habit of going out by the door in St. James's Square?" she asked, somewhat petulantly.

"I beg your pardon, madam: but I was not aware for whom the hackney-coach was intended."

Having thus respectfully apologized, the abigail quitted the room.

A few minutes afterwards a very pretty girl of about sixteen, made her appearance. She was a brunette, with fine eyes, beautiful teeth, and rich red lips; and her black hair was as remarkable for its luxuriance as for its silken fineness. Though short in stature, she was perfectly symmetrical in shape; and from beneath her long cloak peeped forth as delicate a foot and ankle as the most particular *connoisseur* could wish to behold. But, alas! there was a cloud upon the beautiful face of this young creature;—and it was not the shade of the neat gipsy-hat that was set so tastefully upon her well-formed head;—but it was the sombre gloom of a deep melancholy.

Caroline Walters—for that was her name—carried in her hands a bonnet and cloak, which she assisted Mrs. Brace to put on; and, when the milliner was thus attired for going out, Harriet entered the room to announce that the hackney-coach was at the door.

"You have got everything that you want, my dear Caroline?" said Mrs. Brace, speaking to Miss Walters in a tone of remarkable kindness, and even affection.

"Everything, madam—thank you," responded the young creature; and she turned hastily aside to conceal the tears that were tracing each other down her cheeks: for though the establishment of Mrs. Brace could scarcely be called a home, yet it was the only home that this poor girl had known for two years past—and her heart was swelling ready to break at the idea of quitting it, and under such circumstances too!

"Come, Caroline—dry those tears," said Mrs. Brace, patting her upon the back in an endearing manner. "You will receive every attention and enjoy every comfort where you are going—and I shall pay you a visit as frequently as the numerous calls upon my time will permit. Besides, I shall allow you plenty of pocket-money, Caroline ——"

"Oh! my dear madam," exclaimed the young girl, now bursting into a violent fit of weeping, "there are certain things which no money can purchase!"

"Money can procure every source of happiness in this world, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, soothingly; "and you are wrong thus to give way to your grief."

"Alas! money cannot purchase peace of mind nor restore lost innocence, madam," returned Miss Walters, in a voice almost suffocated with profound sobs;—"neither can money procure oblivion for the past!"

"This is childish, Caroline," observed Mrs. Brace, but not speaking impatiently. "Remember that I will always be a good friend to you ——"

"Forgive me, dear madam, for thus yielding to my grief," said the orphan—for such indeed she was. "I know that you are my only friend. See, madam," she continued, hastily wiping her eyes, and turning towards the milliner a countenance to which she endeavoured to coax up smiles: "I am calm now—I am indeed—and I will not cry any more!"

"There's a good girl," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "All the tears in the world will not mend matters—

and you will find Mrs. Lindley a very generous-hearted and amiable woman. Come, let me see a brighter smile still upon your sweet face—and we will then depart."

"I feel quite happy now, dear madam—you have completely reassured me," said Caroline; but a profound sigh convulsed her bosom at the same time that she uttered those words in which she herself so vainly endeavoured to believe.

Mrs. Brace now made the young creature swallow a glass of wine, which imparted an immediate glow to her features and made her *seem* happy, though her heart was still agitated as the ocean after a storm.

They then quitted the room together; and as they passed through the shop, the young ladies engaged in that part of the establishment crowded round their companion to say farewell. Again the tears started into Caroline's eyes: but her friends, who were well acquainted with the reason which necessitated her temporary absence, appeared quite astonished that she should be otherwise than delighted at the prospect of a life of ease, indolence, and comfort for a few months. Poor Miss Walters did not however survey the matter in the same light as those other young ladies who had already passed through the same experiences on which this orphan girl was now about to enter.

At last Mrs. Brace and Caroline were seated in the hackney-coach, which immediately departed in the direction of Westminster-bridge, according to the instructions which the former hastily whispered to the driver.

Throwing herself back in the vehicle, Mrs. Brace drew her cloak around her: for the evening was very cold. Poor Caroline's teeth chattered, although the windows were both drawn up: but, in *her* case, the state of her feelings was of that nature which aggravated the chill without by means of the chill within;—and it was the chill that lay at the heart's core which was more icy than that of the wintry temperature!

For, Oh! bitter is the pang when all the streams of youth's fond hopes are frozen at their source,—when the fountains of the young heart's first affections are suddenly congealed at the moment that they seem to be gushing forth in their most cheerful brightness,—and when the flood of fervid feeling that was wont to bear flowers upon its moving bosom, becomes suddenly ice-bound and has naught but withered leaves sweeping with ominous rustle over its surface!

Poor Caroline!—thus was it with her;—and yet she had only just entered her seventeenth year!

The coach had proceeded for some distance without a word being exchanged on the part of its inmates, when suddenly a deep sob, which the young girl could not stifle—hard though she tried to do so—caught the ear of Mrs. Brace.

"Do not be unhappy, dear Caroline," said the lady. "Again I assure you that you will be well cared for at Mrs. Lindley's—and I shall always be your friend. But is it possible that you love ——"

"Oh! do not mention his name, madam!" cried the girl, suddenly becoming powerfully excited. "It would drive me mad! I know not whether I love him—or hate him,—whether I could kill him—or throw my arms about his neck and cover him with kisses. My God! I cannot comprehend the state of my own feelings with regard to him."

"You should study to forget him, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, assuming a solemn and impressive manner.

"That were impossible!" exclaimed Miss Walters, with a vehemence not only strange in so young a creature, inasmuch as it denoted a naturally fiery temperament,—but also contrasting singularly with the subdued, docile, and retiring manner which had characterised her a short time before.

"Impossible!" repeated Mrs. Brace, in a tone of unfeigned surprise "And wherefore, my love?"

"Because I must cherish his image either to make it an object of worship, or an incitement to revenge," answered Caroline, her voice suddenly becoming gloomy and sullenly determined.

"You astonish—you alarm me!" cried Mrs. Brace. "I never heard you talk in so wild a strain before. For heaven's sake, compose yourself, Caroline—and give not way to such eccentric thoughts."

"Pardon me, my dear madam, if I have said aught to offend you," murmured the young girl;—and a revulsion of the heart's emotions rapidly taking place, she burst into a flood of weeping.

Mrs. Brace did not now attempt to console her: she knew that, after the excitement which the poor creature had so recently experienced, the most certain relief was to be found in a free and copious outpouring of tears.

Meantime the coach had passed over Westminster Bridge; and, in a short time turning to the right, it entered the maze of streets contiguous to Lambeth Palace.

In this neighbourhood is situate Fore Street, the houses on one side of which overlook that section of the river which lies between the archiepiscopal dwelling and Vauxhall Bridge. At the present day, these houses consist chiefly of commercial or trading establishments: but in the times whereof we are writing, there were several private dwellings in that quarter.

These buildings stood—as indeed many of the structures still stand—upon the very verge of the river's bank; so that anything thrown out of the back windows, would fall into the water at high tide. The fronts of the houses looked upon Fore Street, which was a narrow, gloomy, and lonesome thoroughfare,—not altogether enjoying the best of reputations, although no specific charge was openly made against it. But it was one of those streets where paving and lighting rates were not collected in those days, as neither one of the two purposes for which such levies are usually made was applied to this particular locality.

The five or six private dwellings to which allusion has been made, stood altogether in a row, unbroken by a single shop-front. They were old houses—with massive gables, small windows, and doors sunk three or four feet below the level of the footway, so that they were reached by a descent of steps.

All these tenements were sombre in appearance, and gave passers-by impressions irresistibly gloomy,—such as that they were inhabited by misers or misanthropes—or that some one lay dead within, awaiting the day for the funeral.

But the central house was more melancholy—more cheerless—and more sinister in its aspect than all the rest. The brick walls appeared more dingy—the heavy gables more frowning—the door more prison-like at the bottom of the steps. It was also in some points different from the others—as if the

owner or the inhabitant had positively studied to enhance the gloom which characterised it, and render its aspect more ominous and foreboding than that of its companions. For large wooden shades projected over the windows in such a way that no one looking out of those casements could possibly catch a glimpse of the sky, but must perforce cast the eyes downward,—the effect being the same as that experienced by one wearing a green shade! The real object of these overhanging contrivances was doubtless to prevent the inhabitants of the opposite houses from being able to notice what was going on in the front rooms of this particular dwelling: but in order to obtain this security against the prying eyes of the curious, the building had been invested with the gloom of a monastic establishment or a nunnery.

But as if those uncouth shades, which were painted a dull leaden colour, were not sufficient to keep out every gleam of cheerfulness that might by any accident happen to light upon this sombre abode, the inmates almost invariably had the blinds pulled down, and not unfrequently the curtains drawn. Nay, often the shutters, which were on the plan that enables them to be folded at will into the sides of the window-frames themselves, were kept closed all day in some of the rooms—aye, and for days and days together too: so that, under all these circumstances, the dark pall of funereal gloom was never lifted from off that house!

And it was here that the hackney-coach stopped: it was here that Mrs. Brace and her young companion alighted!

But when, even through the deep obscurity which prevailed at that hour and particularly in that street, the eyes of Caroline Walters were enabled to embrace some portion of this soul-chilling gloominess of appearance which we have attempted to describe, —an awful sensation came over her—a cold, slow, and horrified shuddering, as if a clammy snake were gradually — gradually — gradually winding itself around her person, underneath her clothing!

A dizziness followed—and for a few moments everything appeared to be in a whirl;—then she felt as if she must shriek out and fall headlong into some unknown but terrible and fathomless abyss,—when she was suddenly recalled to her senses by the opening of the door, and the appearance of an elderly woman, bearing a light, on the threshold at the bottom of the descent of steps.

"Come, my dear girl," said Mrs. Brace, taking Caroline's hand: "let me introduce you to my friend Mrs. Lindley, who is here to receive you."

The young girl threw a shuddering glance upon the woman, who was endeavouring to wreath her countenance into a bland smile of welcome;—but as the light, which she shaded with her long thin hand, was thrown full upon her features, it gave them a ghastly appearance—for Mrs. Lindley's face was long, angular, and sallow.

"Come, I say, Caroline—dear Caroline!" whispered Mrs. Brace, almost in an imploring tone, as she felt the young girl's hand snatched back abruptly from her own.

Those words succeeded in somewhat reassuring the affrighted creature—for they were spoken in a tone of penetrating kindness; and she accordingly followed the milliner down the steps into the house.

Mrs. Lindley then shut the door, and conducted her visitors from the long, low, dark passage, to the end of which Caroline's straining eyes could not penetrate,—into a small parlour opening therefrom.

The shutters were closed inside the casements: the blinds were down—and the dark stuff curtains were drawn,—as if the object were hermetically to seal up those windows, so that not a crevice should afford any passer-by an opportunity of peering into the room. The furniture was of walnut-wood, and looked like cheap in its funereal dye: a few old and villanously executed steel-engravings, professing to be portraits of eminent physicians, and set in common black frames, were suspended to the whitecotting;—and in an antique book-case a few mouldy volumes on subjects of midwifery and the uses of herbs, kept company with a huge Bible fastened by means of silver clasps.

There was a good fire in the grate: but the lambent flames that rose from a pile of crackling coal, failed to mitigate the gloomy appearance of this room;—and even the large black cat, which lazily opened its sparkling, glass-like green eyes, as it lay rolled up on the hearth rug, had something ominous and foreboding about it in the estimation of the trembling, shuddering Caroline Walters.

Mrs. Lindley politely drew forward seats for the accommodation of her visitors; and then, slowly sinking down upon an easy chair with a very high back rudely carved, she put on a great pair of horn spectacles for the purpose of taking a good long survey of Caroline.

The young creature felt a disagreeable chill come over her, as the woman's small, dark, reptile-like eyes gleamed upon her through the large circular glasses: for it seemed as if a snake were endeavouring to fascinate her with its hideous gaze. And so far fascinated she indeed was, that she could not withdraw her looks from the countenance of Mrs. Lindley; they were rivetted upon that cadaverous face with its sharp features and its parchment skin—its thin pale lips and its thick and prominent eyebrows.

"She is a sweet pretty girl, my dear madam," observed the woman, suddenly turning towards the milliner, and speaking in that mysterious and subdued tone which the very nature of her profession had rendered habitual, and which she therefore used on all occasions even when commonplace subjects might have enabled her to dispense with so much caution.

"And Carry is not only a pretty girl—but a very good girl," said Mrs. Brace, in answer to Mrs. Lindley's remark. "I have assured her that she will experience nothing but the most affectionate kindness from your hands——"

"Hush! my dear madam—hush!" interrupted the woman, placing her finger upon her lip. "Not so loud, if you please! Remember that walls have ears——"

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lindley—I quite forgot," returned the lady to whom this remonstrance was addressed: then, continuing to speak in a more subdued tone, she said, "You will find Caroline docile, amiable, and obliging—and therefore I am certain that you will agree perfectly well together."

"I have no doubt of it," said Mrs. Lindley. "Some of Miss Walters' companions at your establishment, my dear madam, have most likely already informed her how I am accustomed to behave to my lodgers," continued the woman, taking off her horn spectacles and smiling with mysterious significancy. "Let me see—the last that I had here from your house, Mrs. Brace, was Emily Burdett—a dear good, lively girl! She was always humming tunes from morning to night—and so I gave her the best room at the back of the house, that she might sing to the sun and not to the street. Yes—a nice girl was Miss Burdett! The one before her was Rachel Forrester, I think—a fine young woman—tall and stately as Juno—and passionately fond of reading romances. Pray, are those young ladies with you now, my dear madam?"

"Oh! yes," replied Mrs. Brace: "and I rather think——"

"Hush!—what?" murmured Mrs. Lindley, leaning forward with an air of great mystery to catch the revelation about to be made, and the nature of which she could pretty well conjecture. "Don't speak too loud, mind! What were you going to say? You think——"

"That Rachel Forrester will have to pay you another visit in a couple of months, or so," added Mrs. Brace, irresistibly and also unconsciously catching for the moment a portion of that extreme habit of caution which appeared to keep Mrs. Lindley ever on the *qui vive* lest her words should be overheard by curious ears or her movements noticed by prying eyes.

"Well — well," said the woman; "these things will happen—and it makes a good trade for me," she added, with a low chuckling laugh, which was however the loudest that she ever indulged in. "Won't you take off your bonnet and cloak, and stay to supper with us?" she inquired, after a short pause, and still addressing herself to the milliner.

"No, I thank you—I must return home almost immediately," replied Mrs. Brace. "But you had better take off your things, my love," she added, turning towards Caroline.

The young girl rose from her chair and mechanically complied with the suggestion of her mistress. She unfastened the strings of her gipsy-hat, which she placed upon the table; and then slowly let her cloak fall from her shoulders. The casual observer, on glancing at the figure of Caroline Walters, would

not have suspected its robust proportions to proceed from any other cause than the vigorous health of girlhood: but the experienced eye would have instantly perceived that she was far advanced in the way to become a mother, and that unnatural means of compression had been adopted to conceal her shame up to the present moment.

She blushed deeply as she removed her cloak;—for she observed that Mrs. Lindley had at the same instant put on her spectacles again, and was once more surveying her with earnest attention.

"Sit down, my sweet child," said Mrs. Brace: "remember that this is to be your home for the next two or three months——"

"Hush!" murmured Mrs. Lindley, taking off her glasses, and raising her fore-finger significantly: "not so loud!"—then, addressing herself to Caroline, she said, "Your excellent mistress desires you to consider this house your home, until you are in a condition to leave it again;—and I cordially reiterate the assurance. Cheer up, therefore, Miss Walters—and let me observe a smile upon your pretty face."

"Yes—pray smile, Carry," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "You will soon be reconciled to your new abode—and next Sunday evening I will come and pass an hour or two with you."

"You are very—very kind," murmured the young girl, with difficulty subduing a violent outburst of grief: for, in spite of all the soothing words that fell upon her ears, she had never felt more completely friendless—lonely—and desolate in her life.

"Have you many inmates at present?" inquired Mrs. Brace of the woman to whose care the unhappy Miss Walters was thus consigned.

"Four or five," was the answer. "The place is never altogether empty, you know," she added, with that subdued chuckling laugh which Caroline shuddered to hear.

"And of course Miss Walters will find companions in them?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"In all save *one*," responded Mrs. Lindley, now sinking her tone to the lowest whisper. "But, hush!—what noise was that? I thought I heard the shutters creak——"

"No—it was only the hackney-coach moving a little outside," observed Mrs. Brace. "You were saying that there is one lady at present in your house——"

"Hush! not so loud!—walls have ears!" interposed the woman, nervously. "But the fact is that I *have* beneath my roof a young lady in reference to whom the utmost precaution and secrecy are requisite,—a young lady of high birth——hush! what noise was that?—the hackney-coach again——and she never quits her own room. Ah! 'tis a sad affair—a sad affair, by all that I can learn—and *that* is little enough. Such a sweet creature, too—of such heavenly beauty——But there is that horrid noise again——"

"It is nothing—I can assure you it is nothing," observed Mrs. Brace, impatiently.

"Hush! not so loud!" resumed Mrs. Lindley. "As I was saying, the young lady in question is the only one in whom Miss Walters will *not* find a companion."

"At all events, you will not be without society, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, rising from her seat. "And now, my dear girl, I must leave you—for I need not declare that my time is very, very valuable just at present."

"But you will come and see me soon?" exclaimed the wretched girl, throwing herself into the milliner's arms, and kissing her with that fervour which seemed to imply that the poor forlorn creature knew she was embracing her only friend.

"Yes—I will come and see you often—very often, my dear Caroline," said Mrs. Brace;—and having returned her caresses with an affectionate warmth—or, at least, with a great display of tender feeling—the fashionable milliner gently disengaged herself from the arms of the poor girl who clung to her with the tenaciousness of a distracted grief.

At length Mrs. Brace, having succeeded in getting away from her, hurriedly took her departure: and Caroline Walters found herself alone in that gloomy apartment with the MIDWIFE!

CHAPTER XXII.

SCENES AT MRS. BRACE'S ESTABLISHMENT.

IT was about nine o'clock when Mrs. Brace reached her abode in Pall Mall; and repairing to her own private parlour—the one that we have described in a previous chapter—she threw off her cloak and bonnet, and summoned Harriet to her presence.

To her inquiries whether the letter had been duly sent to Mr. Meagles, and whether the cook had provided a succulent repast for Mr. Hartley and Octavia, she received satisfactory replies; and having refreshed herself with a glass of the finest Madeira, after her journey to Mrs. Lindley's gloomy residence, she proceeded to the large room where the young ladies of her establishment were accustomed to take their meals.

This apartment was well furnished, and lighted by a chandelier suspended to the ceiling. A good fire blazed on the hearth;—the table was spread with a quantity of plate; and the eleven or twelve beautiful young women who were scattered about conversing in groups, enhanced the cheerful appearance of the scene.

We have before stated that these ravishing creatures formed a combination of charms and displayed a variety of loveliness enchanting to behold. There, indeed, all admirers of whatsoever style of beauty might have found their tastes gratified. The tall and stately young woman, with dignified look and imposing demeanour,—the sylph-like figure and the volatile disposition,—the slender, pale, and interesting girl, with pensive countenance and bashful manners,—the stout, robust, and full-proportioned hoyden, with a voluptuous exuberance of charms,—the coal-black hair and the lustrous dark eyes,—the flaxen ringlets and the melting azure orbs,—the chesnut locks and the eyes of hazel,—the glowing auburn tresses and the eyes of dark blue,—the Roman countenance, denoting strong passions,—the Grecian profile, indicating a poetic consciousness,—the lively French features, far more interesting than positively beautiful,—the pure Englishface, with its admirable blending of the healthy red and the delicate white,—the ravishing brunette, with eyes brimful of desire and lips that seem made only to be kissed;—these were the varied elements that made up the combination of so much female loveliness!

At about half-past nine o'clock, an excellent supper was served up. Poultry, game, French

dishes, sweets, preserved fruits, and wines, were spread with no niggard hand upon the board, at the head of which Mrs. Brace took her seat. And it was an enchanting spectacle to behold that really very handsome woman thus presiding at a table so well appointed in all its arrangements, and surrounded by a bevy of the most lovely girls that could possibly have been collected together.

In fact the milliner was accustomed to regale her young ladies with the most luxurious living. She likewise paid them good salaries, and spared no expense in ensuring their comfort beneath her roof. Had they been her own daughters, she could not have treated them better. But this was of course a matter of calculation on her part. They were useful to her: they constituted the main attraction of what may be termed the public department of her establishment;—for not only do fashionable ladies love to be attended upon by beautiful women,—but husbands, brothers, and even friends are sure to take wives, sisters, and female acquaintances to those shops where the most charming girls are to be seen. Then again, they ensured her a choice, select, and lucrative patronage in the *private* branch of her avocations. For every one was sold over and over again to the aristocratic debauchees and noble or wealthy voluptuaries for whose special behoof the house in St. James's Square was kept up; and as each of the houris in her establishment yielded Mrs. Brace hundreds of guineas per annum, she could well afford to regale them in excellent style, as it was also her interest to render them satisfied with their position and retain them in her employment.

But let us glance at their behaviour at the supper table. A stranger would have fancied that he was contemplating one of the most pleasing scenes which could possibly be presented to his gaze,—a kind-hearted, motherly, well-bred woman presiding at a table surrounded by young ladies of elegant manners, strict propriety of conduct, and of principles as excellent as their personal loveliness was ravishing. For although they were well aware that Mrs. Brace's establishment was nothing more nor less than a brothel of the first fashion,—and although Mrs. Brace herself knew that not an eye which met her own, reflected the thoughts of a chaste soul,—although, in a word, the charms which graced the banqueting-board were a marketable commodity, constantly obtaining a high price, nevertheless, not an improper word was uttered—not an impure idea nor even an indelicate allusion was ever syllabled by those mouths on which the hot lips of lust had been so often pressed.

After supper, Mrs. Brace and her attendant satellites proceeded into an adjoining apartment, which was denominated the *Ladies' Drawing-Room;* and there they diverted themselves in a variety of ways until eleven o'clock. Some read romances—others played at cards,—a few whiled away the time in embroidery for themselves,—one or two had recourse to music,—and the rest gathered round the cheerful fire to converse.

When the usual hour for retiring was proclaimed by a handsome time-piece upon the mantle, the young ladies all bade Mrs. Brace an affectionate "good night," and departed in an orderly manner—without noise, giggling, or confusion—to their respective chambers.

On the particular night of which we are speaking, and which was characterised by so many and such varied incidents, Mrs. Brace retired to her own bed-room immediately after the work-girls had quitted her; and in half-an-hour she sought her couch. Sleep soon visited her eyes; for, in spite of the equivocal nature of her avocation, she was not at any time much troubled with qualms of conscience.

But on the present occasion she was haunted by unpleasant dreams. The image of the unhappy Caroline Walters rose up before her mental view—reproaching her for a base violation of solemn pledges made to the deceased parents of the girl, and for foul treachery practised towards the friendless orphan. At length—as it is often the case with dreams—the figure of the wronged and outraged Caroline changed suddenly into some ghastly shape, which seated itself upon the bosom of the sleeper;—and for a few minutes Mrs. Brace endures all the horrors of a night-mare.

She awoke in a cold tremor, and with a consternation in the brain. For a short time she could not persuade herself that she had been made the sport of a disordered imagination: but, as there was a light in the room, her eyes began to remark familiar objects; and she at length acquired the certainty that she was indeed safe in her own bed, and that nothing which her fevered fancy had conjured up was present to her view.

Referring to her watch, which lay on a night-table within reach, she found that it was only one o'clock in the morning, and that she had not slept more than an hour and a half. Settling herself, therefore, in the most comfortable position to woo the embraces of slumber, she closed her eyes, and was already beginning to feel a soft and dreamy repose stealing over her; when a strange sound caused her to wake suddenly up with a nervous start.

She listened with breathless attention—and all was still!

Was it, then, a false alarm?—perhaps the first phase in another hideous dream that was about to whirl her in imagination through the horrors of a second night-mare? Her mouth was parched—and she refreshed her palate with some sweet and delicious beverage that stood upon the night-table.

But as she put down the glass another strange sound fell upon her ears. Again she listened; the noise was continued—and, as she racked her imagination to conjecture what it could be, the thought flashed to her mind that it resembled the sawing of wood.

Mrs. Brace was a courageous woman naturally: she moreover knew that there were three persons of the male sex beneath the roof at that moment—namely, her two footmen and Mr. Harley. Succour might therefore be reckoned upon in case of danger;—and this reflection decided the milliner how to act.

Hastily thrusting her feet into slippers and enveloping herself in her cloak, she stole cautiously forth from her bed-chamber. Then she paused on the landing—and listened. The strange noise had ceased: but she fancied that she heard voices whispering somewhere below.

It often seems as if our organs had the faculty of rendering themselves more sensitive and keen on those occasions when their ordinary powers would scarcely answer the desired purpose or serve the sudden emergency:—and thus it was in the present

instance. For as Mrs. Brace held her breath to listen, her auricular sense required a remarkable vividness; and she distinctly heard the sounds of two rough voices whispering together in a very subdued tone. A few words that she caught—such as "saw," "crow-bar," and "skeleton-keys,"—convinced her beyond all possibility of doubt that thieves had obtained an entry into the house; and it was the dining-room door which they were thus deliberating how to force open, it being invariably locked every night by Mrs. Brace herself ere she retired to rest.

All her plate was kept in the side-board in that apartment: and she was suddenly seized with a mortal apprehension lest the robbers should possess themselves of so valuable a prize ere she could summon the necessary assistance. For, on second thoughts, she dared not call Mr. Harley to her aid; there were reasons why he must not stand the chance of being recognised in that house, even by thieves;—and she would have to descend the staircase and pass into the dwelling looking on St. James's Square in order to arouse her footmen.

What, then, was to be done? Moments—nay, minutes were flying; and every one was precious!

Bending her head over the bannisters she listened again. The men had succeeded in forcing open the door of the dining-room: and there was not an instant to lose.

It would be useless to awaken the young ladies and the female servants; such a proceeding might alarm the robbers, it was true—but would not perhaps prevent them from making off at once with the booty already in their reach. The only wise expedient was to summon the footmen;—and on this alternative she resolved, at any risk.

Descending the stairs as noiselessly as possible in the dark, Mrs Brace had gained the ground floor, and was on the point of entering the passage leading into the other house, when a light suddenly appeared upon the threshold of the dining-room—and as villanous a countenance as the imagination could ever associate with the name of "burglar" was simultaneously revealed to her eyes.

A scream rose to her lips: but it was stifled at the moment it was bursting forth,—stifled, too, not by any abrupt violence on the part of the robber—but by a sudden consternation which seized upon the lady. A spell appeared to have been thrown around her all in an instant: a tremendous stupefaction—a mental paralysis, had struck her dumb—motionless—powerless.

At the same moment a faint exclamation of ineffable surprise escaped the lips of the burglar—and he also appeared to be riveted to the spot with a bewilderment that defies all attempt at description.

For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace and the burglar stand gazing fixedly upon each other,—he still holding a candle in his hand—she leaning against the wall to which she had staggered when the man's countenance first met her view,—he half doubting whether his eyes were not deceiving him—she every instant acquiring a deeper conviction that the features on which her looks were riveted, were indeed familiar to her!

But the ejaculation which dropt from the tongue of the burglar, had caught the ear of his companion, who was inside the dining-room; and Mrs. Brace, therefore, speedily beheld another countenance appear in the doorway. This second face was red, bloated, and sinister—indeed, almost as vile and repulsive as the first; but it was totally unknown to the milliner.

The stupefaction which had seized upon her, now rapidly yielded to a sense of the very painful position in which she was placed. She no longer even thought of summoning assistance;—and, as to uttering a cry—her lips were sealed! Instead of hoping to have the burglars handed over to the grasp of justice, she felt that she herself was completely in the power of *one*—consequently of *both!*

Suddenly mustering up all her presence of mind and calling all her courage to her aid, Mrs. Brace advanced a few paces, motioning to the men to enter the room. Perceiving that she was about to follow them, they fell back; and then, the instant they had disappeared from the door-way, a pang shot through the brain of the milliner—and, pressing her hand to her brow, she felt for a moment as if her reason were deserting her. But this terrible sensation almost immediately passed away;—and, with a ghastly pallor of countenance, trembling limbs, and a heart palpitating violently, she crossed the threshold, closing the door behind her.

For nearly half-an-hour did Mrs. Brace remain in the company of the two burglars: but of the nature of the interview we can at present form no conjecture. That painful reminiscences had been revived and feelings of intense anguish excited on her part, we can however affirm: for when the door again opened and she came forth, it was with features even more ghastly and corpse-like than when she had entered that room.

Whether the robbers went away empty-handed, or not, we cannot state: but for one fact we can vouch—namely, that the plate remained untouched on the sideboard, and that no valuables of any kind were plundered from the dining-room.

Mrs. Brace herself conducted them to the shop door, which they had forced open in the first instance by means of skeleton keys and a crowbar; and when they had quitted the house, she sank down upon a chair—covered her face with her hands—and burst into a flood of convulsive weeping.

These tears relieved her;—and hurrying away from the shop, she stole cautiously back to her own bed-chamber, which she gained without disturbing a soul.

Sleep visited not her eyes for the remainder of that night. Painful thoughts racked her imagination and banished slumber: but as the hours passed slowly—slowly away, her excitement subsided, and she grew much calmer. It is often easy to conjure back hope where its presence is indispensable, and thus was it that Mrs. Brace succeeded in persuading herself that she should not again be molested by the dreaded individual who had paid her dwelling so ominous a visit during the night.

She rose shortly after five o'clock, and entered her bath-room, where she plunged into the ice-cold water. Alike in winter and in summer, did Mrs. Brace bathe her entire person in this manner; hence the well-preserved condition of her charms and the plumpness of her form's voluptuous contours.

But never had the luxury of the cold bath appeared so truly refreshing as on this occasion. It cooled her heated brain—invigorated her entire frame, rendered languid by want of rest—and raised her depressed spirits to their usual tone. But if her cheeks still retained somewhat of the pallor that the

incident of the past night had left upon them, a cosmetic skilfully applied gave her the complexion of so soft a rose that it was impossible to recognise this triumph of art over nature.

It was shortly after six o'clock that Mrs. Brace descended to her own parlour, where the fire was already lighted. But scarcely had she entered that room, when the lady's-maid burst in with terror depicted upon her countenance, and exclaiming, "Oh! madam—a robbery has been committed during this night!"

Mrs. Brace affected to be sadly alarmed at this announcement; and, following the abigail, she hurried to the dining-room, the door of which had been opened by sawing partially round the lock and then breaking the wood away with a crow-bar—none of the burglars' skeleton-keys having previously succeeded in enabling them to effect an entrance. The side-board had likewise been forced, and all the plate taken out: but, on examining it, not a single article was missing. This circumstance naturally induced the lady's-maid to observe that the burglars were most probably interrupted by some false alarm in the middle of their work—a belief which the milliner took care to encourage, protesting however that it was very strange how so much violence could have been used without in reality disturbing a single soul.

From the dining-room Mrs. Brace and Harriet proceeded to the shop, where nothing had been meddled with. This was not, however, astonishing—as the robbers could not be supposed likely to trouble themselves with bonnets, dresses, and lace-caps. The front door had been forced in the manner already described: but as nothing appeared to have been stolen in the house, full confirmation was thus given to the abigail's opinion that the burglars were unexpectedly disturbed by some false alarm which however had the effect of inducing them to beat a precipitate retreat.

While Mrs. Brace and Harriet were conducting their investigations in the shop, the young ladies made their appearance in twos and threes at a time; and they were much alarmed at first on hearing that thieves had visited the house during the night:—but they were speedily tranquillised by the assurance that nothing had been stolen. Mrs. Brace intimated her desire that no unpleasant notice on the part of the public should be attracted towards the establishment by suffering the particulars of the attempted robbery to transpire; and thus the affair was effectually hushed up.

Scarcely had the milliner returned to her own parlour—it being now nearly seven o'clock in the morning—when Lord Florimel was announced by the footman whose duty it was to attend the door in St. James's Square, by which means of entrance, be it recollected, all persons of the male sex were introduced into the establishment.

The young nobleman had been home to his splendid mansion in Piccadilly, and had resumed his male attire: but it were really difficult to decide which became him most—and this, indeed, was the observation that Mrs. Brace made the moment the footman had retired.

"And now tell me of your success, my dear Florimel," she continued, with an arch smile which enabled her to display her very fine teeth: "your countenance is pale and pensively interesting——"

"Tell me, my dear friend," he abruptly exclaimed, "has Octavia taken her departure yet?"

"Oh! no," responded the milliner. "She can scarcely have slept off the effects of the wine in which the narcotic was mixed, and a glass of which her gallant administered to her. For Harriet was present at the time, and saw her take it."

"Then she is safe!" ejaculated Florimel, with strange emphasis.

"What do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Brace, gazing upon the nobleman in unfeigned surprise.

"My dear friend, do not seek explanations at present," he returned, in a tone slightly petulant: "you shall learn everything in the course of the day. I will come presently and have a long discourse with you. Nay—do not appear angry and pout," he added, patting her plump cheek with his delicate white hand, and resuming his wonted kindness of manner towards her.

"I cannot possibly be angry with you, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, instantly recovering a gay expression of countenance, while her eyes beamed with desire as he thus caressed her. "But has anything extraordinary occurred?"

"Nothing very particular—only that I have *not* succeeded with Pauline, and that I am far from sorry at the failure of my enterprise."

"You speak in enigmas," exclaimed the milliner.

"I will explain the whole by and bye, my dear friend. In the meantime I must fulfil a solemn promise which I have made to Pauline," continued the nobleman: "and this is to induce Octavia to return home without delay—for her father has come back!"

"Her father come back!" repeated Mrs. Brace, turning pale even through the artificial tint of her complexion. "Then all will be discovered——"

"Nothing will be discovered if you only consent to do as I require," interrupted Florimel.

At this moment Harriet entered the room, and whispered something in the ear of Mrs. Brace.

"You wish to see Octavia?" said the latter, turning towards Florimel, as soon as she had received the communication thus privately made to her by the abigail.

"Yes—without delay," answered the nobleman, emphatically.

Mrs. Brace made a sign to Harriet, who instantly quitted the room.

"Is anything the matter?" demanded Florimel, uneasily.

"Nothing of any consequence. Octavia's gallant has taken his departure—and the young lady herself, though comparatively pacified by all her lover has said to her this morning, nevertheless shrinks from the idea of returning home."

"I will undertake to tranquillise her completely," said Florimel. "Have the kindness to order a hackney-coach at once."

Mrs. Brace rang the bell, and gave the footman the requisite instructions. Immediately afterwards Octavia, dressed in her bonnet and shawl, was introduced by Harriet; but on perceiving that Mrs. Brace was not alone, she was about to retire, when the milliner hastily observed, "Fear nothing, Miss Clarendon—this nobleman is a *friend*. Indeed, you may place the utmost confidence in Lord Florimel," she added, by way of making her acquainted with his name and rank.

Octavia, who was very pale and had evidently been weeping, surveyed the young peer with a countenance expressive of mingled surprise and shame,—surprise at the emphatic way in which Mrs. Brace

had alluded to him as a *friend*—and shame at the idea that he was probably no stranger to her frailty.

But with that winning manner which seemed natural to him, and which on account of its feminine softness was so well calculated to inspire confidence, Lord Florimel approached her—took her hand—and said in a reassuring tone, "I am indeed a friend, Miss Clarendon; and in that light I wish you to consider me. But we have not a moment to delay in unnecessary discourse: you must return home immediately—your sister, who is an angel of goodness, will receive you with open arms—and you may likewise expect to embrace your father——"

"My father!" repeated Octavia, with a convulsive start, and with a wild expression suddenly springing up in her eyes.

"Fear nothing, I say—your father suspects not your absence, and need not know it," Florimel hastened to observe. "Pauline is the depositress of your secret—and she would sooner die than betray you."

"Pauline knows all!—my father is returned!" gasped the wretched girl, sinking upon a chair;—and then a flood of tears came to her relief.

"In the name of heaven, compose yourself, Miss Clarendon!" said Mrs. Brace, caressing her with a great show of affection. "Do you not comprehend what this kind nobleman has told you? Your sister has learnt your secret, and will do all she can to aid you——"

"It is this that cuts me to the soul," exclaimed Octavia, bitterly: "for how shall I be able to look my pure and virtuous sister in the face?"

"She loves you—loves you tenderly, Miss Clarendon," said Florimel. "But, for heaven's sake, come! It is now seven o'clock—and you must be home before eight!"

Octavia started up—dried her tears—and, the dread of her father's wrath arming her with sudden energy, declared her readiness to depart.

But as it would be dangerous to the reputation of Mrs. Brace's establishment for a lady and gentleman to be seen issuing forth together at that early hour in the morning, the milliner undertook to accompany Octavia in the hackney-coach as far as Piccadilly, where Florimel could join them and take her place.

This was accordingly done: the vehicle, with Mrs. Brace and the young lady inside, proceeded as far as the beginning of Bond Street, where it waited for Florimel, who passed out of the establishment by the house in St. James's Square. The milliner then alighted—the nobleman took his seat by Octavia's side—and the coach moved rapidly off towards the Edgeware Road.

Florimel now proceeded, in terms as delicate as possible, to give his fair companion certain necessary explanations. He told her how he had heard of her sister's charms and was resolved to win her heart—how he had called on the previous evening in female attire—how Pauline had discovered his treachery by some inadvertent expressions he had used—how he fell upon his knees before her and besought her forgiveness—and how a virtuous passion had superseded the base intentions that had originally animated him.

He then informed Octavia that while he and her sister were seated together in the back parlour, her father had unexpectedly arrived—that Pauline had succeeded in inducing him to believe that Octavia had already retired to rest—and that he (Florimel) had subsequently quieted Pauline's alarms by declaring the he knew where her sister was and would guarantee her safe return before eight in the morning. He added that being in Mrs. Brace's confidence, he was acquainted with Octavia's amour: but he assured her that he neither knew, nor sought to learn, who was the object of her affection.

Octavia scarcely comprehended all these details—for there was a confusion in her brain: she however understood enough to convince her that Pauline would save her from exposure in respect to her father—and that was all she cared for!

The explanations of Lord Florimel had scarcely reached their conclusion, when the coach came within sight of the villa; and the nobleman ordered it to stop. Octavia alighted—and, having murmured a few words of gratitude to her generous friend, she hurried away towards the house.

Florimel waited until he saw Pauline appear at the garden-gate to receive her sister; and the hasty signal which the younger Miss Clarendon made to him, as he kept his head out of the carriage-window, convinced him that Octavia was in time to escape detection on the part of her sire.

He then ordered the coachman to take him to his own residence in Piccadilly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. PAGE'S RESEARCHES.

Our readers will remember that we left Mr. Page in his bed at the George and Blue Boar, at the time when awaking in the morning after his night's adventures in the eastern district of London, he found himself attacked by a violent fit of rheumatism. It will likewise be recollected that he sent for medical assistance; and the doctor immediately recommended him to take a warm bath. This the commercial traveller did; and, on returning to his bed, he fell into a sound sleep.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when he awoke; and he found himself so much better that he got up and sat by the fire. A basin of mock turtle soup, which he then discussed, appeared to improve him still more; and he was able to walk about his room with comparative ease—the rheumatism having subsided into a mere sensation of stiffness in the limbs.

On making inquiries of the waiter, he ascertained that his employer Mr. Hodson had called in the course of the day; but on being informed that Page was asleep, the merchant had taken his departure, as he was unwilling to disturb him.

Our readers have seen quite enough of the commercial traveller to be well aware that his disposition was of the most restless, bustling, and excitable nature; and they will not therefore be surprised when we inform them that he was most anxious to make certain researches suggested by one of the papers contained in the pocket-book.

This document was the scrap whereon the following lines were scrawled with a pencil, and in a tremulous hand:—

"Look under the stone in the farthest corner to the right, in the cellar. Use it wisely, Julia—and you will prosper: act rashly—and you will be ruined."

That this note was written by the old man who had died in his presence on the preceding night,

Page was tolerably well convinced; because that individual had spoken of Julia as his "ungrateful daughter"—and Julia's name was mentioned in the document. In fact, the intimation therein contained, was addressed to her: and to what could it allude, save a treasure?

Page had it all cut and dried in his imagination. The old man must have been a miser—and Julia would become an heiress! It was evident, by the existence of the note itself, that this Julia was unaware of the locality where her father kept his money—even if she knew that he had any money at all. Therefore, if Page could succeed in possessing himself of the treasure without her knowledge, so much the better; if not, then he could but propose to marry her—and he should become a rich man in either case.

Such was the castle-building in which the commercial traveller indulged, as he sat by the fire in his chamber.

Accordingly, he resolved to issue forth at once in search of that miserable court which had been the scene of the previous night's adventures. The rheumatism had pretty nearly left him—and, even if it had not, what cared he so long as he could drag one leg after another? But, then, was he not about to venture into the very jaws of danger? Might he not encounter the Magsman or some of that formidable fellow's adherents who knew him and who would thrust him back into the dungeon whence he had escaped with so much difficulty? All this was perfectly true; but were not the risks worth running? Page thought so: his avarice was excited—and his courage rose in proportion.

The clocks were striking six in the evening,—that same evening which Lord Florimel passed with Pauline, and on which Mrs. Brace took Caroline Walters to the midwife's house in Lambeth, as Mr. Page, enveloped in his cloak, stepped into a hackney-coach in Holborn, and ordered himself to be driven to the East London Dock. At this point he alighted; and having dismissed the vehicle, began to take as well as he could possibly remember the same route which he had traversed in a contrary direction on the previous night.

Plunging into the maze of dark, dirty, and dangerous streets, he found that it was no easy task to trace a particular course in such a wilderness of brick and mortar, without the knowledge of even the names of the various thoroughfares. But Page was not readily baffled; he had a grand object in view—and never had he felt so bold and so enterprising. By dint of perseverance, he began to discover certain salient features which he remembered to have noticed on the former occasion: here, for instance, was a tavern with a flag-staff on the roof—there was the local round-house, or cage, with the watchman's box at the side,—here was a carrier's establishment, with two or three vans standing in the street—there was a blacksmith's forge where the heavy hammers rang and the glowing furnace blazed all night long—here, again, was a public house with another remarkable sign that could not fail to be recognised, even in the darkness—and there was a low boozing-ken, the door of which being always open, afforded the passers-by a view of the loathsome interior, the aspect of which would not be readily forgotten.

Thus picking his way, and ever and anon recognising points or features which might be termed the land-marks of the district, Mr. Page at last succeeded in discovering the court whereof he was in search. For a moment his heart failed him as he plunged his looks up the low entrance-archway and thought of the noisome dungeon at the end; but when he beheld lights gleaming from many windows, his courage revived—for he thought within himself, "All the inhabitants of this court cannot be thieves or murderers; and as neither the Magsman nor his adherents should capture me without a desperate resistance on my part, assistance would surely arrive from some quarter or another in answer to my cries."

As this reflection passed through his mind, the commercial traveller mechanically placed his hands upon his coat-pockets to feel whether his pistols were safe; and at the same time he turned boldly into the court.

Not a soul was to be seen—all the doors were shut—but shouts of revelry and boisterous mirth came from some of the dwellings, while shrieks and oaths bore unmistakable testimony to the violent quarrels that were going on in others.

Page knocked at the house which was the object of his visit to this quarter of the metropolis; and he was just thinking what course he should adopt in case his summons remained unanswered, when the door was opened by a young female holding a light in her hand. She was poorly dressed,—but by no means bad-looking; for her features were regular, and her figure was good; but the dark circles round the eyes, the peculiar redness of the lips, and the extreme paleness of the cheeks gave her a dissipated air—while the boldness of her looks at once proclaimed the unblushing courtezan.

"Who are you?" she demanded, abruptly—almost insolently, upon opening the door.

"If your name is Julia," said Page, hastily,—for he did not admire the circumstance of being kept standing in the court,—"it is of the utmost importance that I should have a private conversation with you as soon as possible."

"But who are you, I again ask?" cried the young woman, hesitating whether to admit the visitor, or not—indeed, uncertain whether to regard him as friend or foe.

"I was present at your father's death last night!" returned Page, in a solemn and impressive manner.

"Then walk in," said Julia, standing back to allow him room to enter the narrow passage; and when he had complied with her invitation, she closed and fastened the door. Leading the way into an empty room opening from the passage, she placed the candle on the mantel-piece, observing in a comparatively civil tone, "I am sorry, sir, that I cannot ask you up-stairs to the only chamber where there is any furniture,—but, as you may suppose, my father is laid out there—and I can't endure to look on a dead body."

"No apology is necessary," said Page. "An accident brought me into this house last night—and hearing moans up-stairs, I went to see if I could render any assistance——"

"And you found my father dying?" interrupted the girl, her voice indicating some degree of emotion. "I didn't know that he was so bad—or I wouldn't

have left him. In fact, when I went out in the evening, he was sitting up and able to walk—for he came down and bolted the front door after me, as was his wont——"

"Ah! I remember that the door *was* bolted inside, when I first entered the house," exclaimed Page. "But how did you obtain admittance——"

"Rather let me ask how *you* got into this place in the first instance?" cried the girl, now surveying the commercial traveller with looks indicative of mistrust.

"I will satisfy you on that head, Julia," was his immediate answer. "It was by the back way that I came hither——"

"Ah! then you are one of the gentlemen who escaped from the cellar in the next house?" exclaimed the young woman, her countenance clearing up. "Well—don't be afraid—I am not going to betray you. But you asked me how I got into the place, since there was no one—*living*," she added, with a cold shudder, "to open the door. Why—I did not come back until about eight o'clock this morning," she continued; "and then I was accosted in the court by Briggs——"

"Who's Briggs?" demanded the commercial traveller.

"The man that keeps the house next door," was the answer."

"Is he a great stout fellow, with an immense wen upon the crown of his bald head?" inquired Page.

"Just so," replied the girl; and the commercial traveller learnt accordingly that the individual alluded to was the same who had made him write the letter to Mr. Hodson, and who had given him the glass of gin. "Well," resumed Julia, "this man Briggs called me into his room next door—told me that a couple of gentlemen had escaped out of his cellar during the night—and begged me not to say a word about it in the neighbourhood. Of course it was no business of mine: and as I wanted to get into

my own house, Briggs let me pass through the opening which you had made in the wall. This was the way that I got in—and, on going up-stairs, I found my father a corpse in his bed. In the course of the day I noticed that the front door had been unbolted and unlocked—and I was surprised. But now you have explained the mystery."

"Was your father very rich, Julia?" asked Page, fixing upon her a searching look.

"Rich!" she ejaculated, with an ironical laugh.

"Ah! I see—my suspicions are confirmed—he was a miser!" exclaimed the commercial traveller. "But you don't know—you haven't any idea where he was accustomed to conceal his wealth?"—and again he bent his eyes significantly on the young woman.

"Not I, indeed!" she observed, in a strange tone. "Nevertheless," she added, almost immediately, "there must have been a large quantity——"

"Of gold somewhere—eh?" cried Page, chuckling. "Yes—yes—you are right there, my dear. And now, what will you do for me if I help you to—to—this treasure?" he demanded, hesitating whether he should impart his secret to her, or devise some scheme to become the sole possessor of the wealth to which he supposed the scrap of paper to allude.

"What will I do for you?" she exclaimed: "anything you like."

"It would be a pity to divide it," remarked Page, again eyeing her significantly. "A sum of money that is a *fortune* in itself, only makes two poor *competencies* when split into equal shares."

"Pray explain yourself," observed the young woman, impatiently.

"I suppose—that is, I hope—I believe—I presume you are a single woman, Julia?" said the commercial traveller, endeavouring to ogle her tenderly.

"Oh! that I am," she exclaimed, flippantly. "What next?"

"Nothing particular now—at least on that point," returned Page. "But we must at once pass on to another important feature in the business which we have in hand together. Is this your father's writing?" he demanded, with a cunning look, as he produced the scrap of paper.

Julia took the documentary fragment in her hand—glanced rapidly over it—and, with a sudden animation of countenance, exclaimed, "Yes—this is the old man's writing: and now we may be rich for the remainder of our days!"

"I thought so!" ejaculated Page, delighted at finding his fondest hopes thus completely fulfilled. "Come—let us visit the cellar without delay, and inspect the treasure. I will then tell you why I asked whether you were married or not."

The girl smiled significantly, as if she read her companion's meaning and required no farther explanation: and Page was pleased to observe that she possessed a very good set of teeth.

They now descended the stairs to the kitchen, where Julia lighted a lantern, observing that the draught would blow out the candle; and thence they proceeded to the cellar.

The first object which met the eyes of the commercial traveller was the pile of masonry which had been detached from the aperture that had enabled himself and Sir Richard Stamford to escape from the adjoining cellar on the preceding night;—and a chill passed over him as he thought of the possibility of his revisit to that neighbourhood being discovered by the ruffian Briggs or any of his vile confederates—the consequence of which detection would inevitably be a re-consignment to his old quarters, with unconquerable precautions against another escape.

He therefore hesitated for a few moments on the upper step leading into the cellar, and was almost inclined to beat a precipitate retreat: but Julia, who had preceded him, held the lantern high up so as to fling the light upon the spot which she indicated, as she observed, "There's the stone which the paper alludes to."

The idea of being within reach, as it were, of a treasure which his imagination represented to be of no insignificant amount, restored Page to that desperate courage wherewith he had armed himself for the present enterprise; and boldly descending the steps, he proceeded to inspect the stone beneath which the miser's hoardings lay.

"It will require some strong instrument to raise it," he observed, at the expiration of a few moments.

"There is a pick-axe in the kitchen," said Julia; "and I have often wondered what it could be for. Now I understand why my father sometimes required such a thing."

Thus speaking, she tripped lightly away to fetch the implement—while Page retraced his steps to the threshold of the cellar, so as to guard against any treacherous intention which might possibly exist on the girl's part to close the door upon him.

On her return in about a minute, with the pick-axe in her hand, she immediately conjectured what was passing in the mind of the commercial traveller: for, gazing intently upon his countenance, the young woman said, "You are perhaps right as a prudent man to mistrust me: but if you knew how much I hate the people next door—I mean Briggs and all his friends—you would not be alarmed. Besides, have you not come on a business which may prove beneficial to me?—and why, therefore, should I seek to do you an injury?"

"I am glad you have spoken to me in this manner," said Page, perceiving that Julia was rapidly losing her sullenness of temper and acquiring confidence in him: "because it makes me feel all the more pleasure in co-operating with you. You are a nice girl, Julia," he added, patting her face and again ogling her tenderly—which little indications of the matrimonial views which she suspected him to entertain were far from disagreeable to the girl.

"Now, then—get to work," she exclaimed, smiling, and fixing her bold eyes wantonly on the commercial traveller.

He returned the leer, and took the pick-axe from her hand: then, throwing back his cloak, he commenced operations. The mortar which surrounded the flag-stone was not particularly hard; and the task of raising it was speedily accomplished. When it was removed, half-a-dozen canvass bags of tolerable size appeared in a small hollow beneath.

"Six thousand guineas, at the lowest computation!" ejaculated Mr. Page, his heart leaping with delight; and, taking up one of the bags, he weighed it in his hand. "Yes—this contains a thousand, I am sure!" he added, in a tone of exultation.

"How shall we remove them?" asked Julia, also in a joyous manner: "and where shall we take them to?"

"First into the kitchen—or up-stairs, in the room which you showed me just now," responded the commercial traveller.

This latter suggestion was immediately adopted; and when the bags had been conveyed to the empty chamber on the ground-floor and ranged upon the mantel-piece in such a fashion that Mr. Page could embrace the entire array with one gloating glance, he said, "Now, my pretty Julia, we must decide upon our future proceedings. In me you behold a commercial traveller of high respectability and old standing—capable of giving the most satisfactory references. I am unmarried—and have long wanted a wife. What do you say? Can you be happy as Mrs. Page? If so—the bargain is soon struck and the fortune need not be divided."

"Well—if you're willing to take me as I am," responded the young woman unhesitatingly, "I'm sure I cannot object to take you as you are. But we must leave this place together—I mean that we must not separate till the—the——"

"Till the knot is tied—eh, Julia?" added Mr. Page, throwing his arm around her waist and imprinting a kiss upon her lips—which latter process made him aware of the fact that she had recently partaken of a liquor smelling marvellously like gin: but he was not disposed to be over nice under the circumstances.

"Yes—that is what I meant," she observed. "If you are going to make a lady of me, the sooner the better. But my father was a gentleman once, by all accounts," added Julia, with some degree of mournfulness in her tone, as her thoughts were thus suddenly brought back to the memory of her deceased parent.

"By the bye, what is your surname, my dear?" inquired Page.

"Lightfoot," was the answer.

"I thought so!" ejaculated the commercial traveller.

"What do you mean?" demanded the young woman. "Do you know anything about us?"

"Yes—something—but no matter now," replied Page. "We will talk of all that by and bye. For the present we have other business to think of. Stay here we cannot—those villains next door would find me out: and yet how to leave the house until your father is buried——"

"I have already given directions relative to the funeral, which will take place as privately as possible three days hence," interrupted Julia. "In the meantime we can remain together: for even if you had not come here to-night and I had never known you, I should not have stayed any longer in the house with the corpse."

"Come, then," said Page: "we will depart at once. If you have a good strong piece of cord, I will fasten four of these bags round my waist, and my mantle will cover them. The other two you can carry under your shawl or cloak, whichever you possess."

"Stay one moment," exclaimed Julia; and, quitting the room, she hastened up-stairs.

In about a minute she returned, wearing her bonnet and cloak, and carrying a small bundle in her hand. She likewise brought a piece of rope, wherewith the commercial traveller slung four of the bags round his body. The young woman took charge of the remainder of the treasure; and when she had ascertained, by peeping forth from the front door, that the coast was clear, she and her companion quitted the house together.

On emerging from the court, Page directed Julia to guide him by the nearest route towards Tower Hill, where they entered a hackney-coach, which drove them, according to the instructions given, to a tavern in Farringdon Street. There they took up their quarters for the night; inasmuch as the commercial traveller knew very well that he would not be allowed to introduce his female friend to the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.

On the ensuing morning, shortly after nine o'clock, Mr. Page and Julia Lightfoot crossed over the way to the Fleet Prison; and in that establishment they speedily found a parson, who, for the handsome recompense of half-a-crown and a gallon of ale, tied the matrimonial knot and pronounced the nuptial benediction. For at that period Fleet marriages were lawful; and thus the couple who had only known each other a few hours, were made indissolubly *one*.

The reader may perhaps be startled at the circumstance of this ceremony taking place while the corpse of Julia's father was yet above the grounds: but she was anxious on her part to nail a husband while he was in the humour to take her and who, as she termed it, could "make a lady of her;" while he, on the other hand, was equally solicitous to establish a right to that treasure which, until the nuptials were celebrated, belonged wholely and solely to the young woman. Thus all feeling of delicacy was superseded by selfish interest on either side.

As soon as the marriage-rites were thus performed by a drunken parson, assisted by an insolvent prize-fighter who fulfilled the duties of clerk, and in the presence of three or four male and female prisoners who attended as witnesses, Mr. and Mrs. Page drove into Southwark, where they took a genteel lodging, at which we must leave them for the present.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FATHER AND DAUGHTERS.

It is now necessary that we should return to Octavia Clarendon, at the moment when, having taken leave of Lord Florimel who had escorted her home in the manner already described, she encountered Pauline at the garden gate.

But the instant that she met her sister's gaze, the blood gushed in a full tide to her countenance, before so pale; and the words that she would have uttered seemed to rise like a torrent of lava to her throat—remaining there with suffocating effect, and unable to obtain utterance.

"Octavia—my beloved Octavia, restrain your feelings," said Pauline speaking in low hurried tones, as she waved her handkerchief as a signal to Lord Florimel whom she beheld looking forth from the window of the hackney-coach at a little distance. "All is well—our father suspects not your absence," she added with equal haste.

"O Pauline! do you not despise your sister?" murmured Octavia, now recovering the powers of her voice.

"For God's sake, talk not thus!" was the young maiden's rapid adjuration, as she led the way into the house, followed by her sister.

They ascended to their bed-chamber, where Octavia threw aside her bonnet and shawl: then, flinging herself into Pauline's arms, she burst into tears.

"Not a word relative to anything that has oc-

curred!" whispered the younger sister, affectionately pressing the other to her bosom.

"But what can you think of me, Pauline?—what opinion can you entertain of one who——My God!" she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself: "wherefore is it that the rose-entwined path of love should be interspersed with thorns?"

"I conjure you not to give way to these emotions, sister—dearest sister!" murmured Pauline, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Do you not know that I love you? If you are unhappy, is it I who will augment the anguish you already experience? Oh! heavens—no! I have done all I could to screen you—I will do all I can to comfort and console you!"

"Beloved Pauline!" exclaimed Octavia, again and again embracing her kind-hearted sister: then, growing more composed, she said, "It is a terrible necessity which now compels me to prepare to meet my father and subdue the blushes that shame would bring to my cheeks."

"Every word you utter, Octavia, appears to express a regret for what is past," returned Pauline, now surveying her sister with the tenderest solicitude. "Is it possible you can have learnt to love one who is unworthy of you, and whose name you would blush to mention?"

"No—no," answered Octavia, in an impassioned tone: "he whom I love is the noblest—the kindest—and the best of men; and in a few days he will seek an introduction to my father—he will then become a constant visitor to the house—and, after the lapse of a proper interval, he will demand my hand in marriage."

"Then what have you to deplore so deeply?" asked Pauline, delighted with this assurance, and seeking, in the generosity of her soul, to make it even the means of glossing over her sister's fault.

"I do not deplore having given my love to Mr. Harley," responded Octavia, now speaking with the pride of a woman the immensity of whose love is her boast, because she believes herself to be as fondly loved in return.

"Mr. Harley!" ejaculated Pauline, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes—it is he who is to become my husband," replied Octavia.

"This revelation to me is another source of joy," observed the younger sister, her countenance becoming still more radiant: "because I am certain that he is an honourable man. His bearing—his conversation—his delicate attentions—his frank and ingenuous manners—his looks,—all, all bespeak him to be of nature's nobility!" cried the enthusiastic girl, proclaiming the honest convictions of her candid and unsuspecting soul.

"And therefore, dear Pauline," said Octavia, into whose bosom the full tide of confidence, truthfulness, and joy was rapidly transfusing from that of her sister,—"and therefore do I not regret having given my love to him. But I was unhappy—my heart was weighed down—my spirits were depressed, because I feared lest I should become an object of scorn and shame in the eyes of her whom I love and who is so generous and so kind towards me."

"No—never, never!" exclaimed Pauline: and again the sisters embraced fondly. "Is not this singular," said the younger maiden, after a short pause, "that we should both experience love's passion almost at the same time? For I also love Octavia," she added, looking down and with blushes suffusing her cheeks: "yes—I have suddenly learnt to love that handsome young nobleman who brought you home."

"He told me somewhat of your singular interview—but I was too bewildered to comprehend his words in their full sense," observed Octavia. "I however understood enough to know that he sought you in the first instance with an evil intent, and that your virtue subdued him and excited an honourable passion in his soul."

"Such was the case," answered Pauline. "I will make you acquainted with all the details when we have more leisure to converse together," she added, secretly pleased to evade the subject: for the reminiscences of the past night brought the burning blushes to her cheeks, innocent in her virgin purity as she still was. "We must now descend to the breakfast-table: our father will doubtless soon leave his room. And remember, Octavia, should he remark upon his late arrival—remember, I say, that he believed us to have retired to rest hours before: for when he knocked at the door, I hurried up-stairs from the back parlour where I was seated with Lord Florimel—so that I might show a light in the bed-room ere I descended to open the door. I likewise put on my cloak, that he might believe I had hastily risen and had thrown on a few clothes for that purpose."

It was strongly repulsive to Pauline's feelings to utter these little falsehoods in order to impart such a colouring to the incidents that her sister might not suspect Lord Florimel to have actually been in the bed-chamber with her, instead of in the back parlour as she stated: but she would rather even thus condescend to misrepresentation than have her virtue suspected even for an instant by confessing that her prolonged interview with the nobleman had positively occurred in the sleeping-apartment.

Octavia, being now composed and having recovered her presence of mind, descended to the breakfast-table with her sister. There they were speedily joined by Mr. Clarendon, who embraced both his daughters not only with the affectionate satisfaction attendant upon his return home, but likewise with the joy of a parent who has good tidings to impart to his children. Octavia's heart fluttered, and she felt herself blushing and then turning pale a dozen times in a minute, as she received her father's caresses: for she could not resist the reflection that she was pure and chaste when he bade her adieu ere he set out upon his journey, and that it was not with the guilelessness of an innocent heart that she could greet his return.

But Mr. Clarendon did not observe his elder daughter's emotions; and as he made no remark respecting any circumstance attending his late arrival, but began almost immediately to give an account of his journey, her trepidation was speedily soothed and her confidence restored.

It appeared that Mr. Clarendon, on presenting himself at Marchmont Castle in Derbyshire, was received by his noble cousin with a readiness and a cordiality which both amazed and delighted him. The reason of this remarkable and most unexpected condescension on the part of Lord Marchmont was however soon explained. This haughty peer was a

widower and had but one son, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who was about three-and-twenty years of age. Until within a few months of the period of which we are writing, this youthful scion of a noble house had enjoyed such excellent health that he had never known a day's illness: but all of a sudden his constitution appeared to give way,—not with a gradual approach of premature decay—but with an abruptness as if some vital chords in the heart had broken and existence was only held by the few feeble ligaments which remained. The colour forsook his cheeks—his frame, hitherto vigorous though never robust, grew debilitated—his appetite failed him—and he could not induce himself to take enough nourishment to repair the waste of his body: The most eminent physicians were consulted; and they pronounced the affliction to be an unusually inveterate state of atrophy which had thus seized upon this young man, till then so promising. His condition was kept secret from the friends and acquaintances of the family for some months, in the hope that a restoration to health would be accomplished and thus render it unnecessary to excite alarm: but the disease made such rapid progress, that Lord Marchmont lost all hope—for death appeared to be approaching with giant strides that might be *seen!*

The nobleman was thus doomed—in his old age, for he had married very late in life—to behold his son perishing before his eyes; and he now began to reflect that when the fatal moment should arrive and Arthur Eaton should be snatched away by the merciless grasp of the Destroying Angel, the long-neglected —long-discarded— almost forgotten Mr. Clarendon would become heir presumptive to the proud title and vast estates of Marchmont! Therefore, when this gentleman suddenly made his appearance at the Castle, the old nobleman gave him the cordial though mournful welcome due to one who was in all probability destined to be his successor; and Mr. Clarendon then for the first time heard of the distressing state of his younger relative's health. Lord Marchmont spoke not of the past as it regarded his treatment of Mr. Clarendon: but he was liberal in his offers and proposals for the future. The result was that the father of Octavia and Pauline returned home with the certainty of an income of a thousand a-year for the future, and with every prospect of full soon becoming the heir to a noble title and an immense fortune.

Such was the intelligence which Mr. Clarendon now communicated to his daughters, and which they heard with mingled joy and sorrow: for if on the one hand they were delighted at the altered prospects of their well-beloved father, they could not help experiencing a profound sympathy on behalf of their youthful cousin who was so sorely and painfully afflicted. And this feeling was the more admirable on their part, inasmuch as they had not only never seen either Lord Marchmont or the Honourable Arthur Eaton—but they had no very excellent reasons for being interested in a haughty family at whose hands their sire had suffered so much chilling neglect.

Mr. Clarendon now began to unfold to them the views which he had conceived relative to their future mode of life. He proposed forthwith to take a house in a fashionable neighbourhood, and court that society in which the improved state of his circumstances would henceforth enable himself and his daughters to move. Octavia and Pauline were both delighted at the prospects thus developed to their contemplation: for the same thought instantly struck them both—namely, that their sudden elevation in the social sphere would render them more worthy of the suitors who had already appeared for their hands.

A considerable portion of the morning was taken up in these explanations and discussions; and when there was at last a pause in the conversation, Octavia and Pauline began to inform their father of the adventure which had occurred in respect to Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Mordaunt. They told him how the carriage had broken down in the road,—how they offered the hospitality of the villa to the two ladies travelling in the vehicle,—how Mrs. Mordaunt became a mother during the night,—how the infant boy was entrusted in a mysterious manner to Mr. Thurston, the surgeon,—and how Mrs. Smith had insisted upon presenting them (Octavia and Pauline) with valuable presents in return for their kindness.

Mr. Clarendon listened with profound attention to the extraordinary narrative; and when it was concluded, he praised his daughters for having so promptly offered the ladies an asylum, but regretted that they should have accepted the jewellery. On this point he however touched lightly enough: for his own altered circumstances had put him into too good a humour and had elevated his spirits too highly to allow him to be very serious in his remonstrances. In respect to the adventure itself, he coincided with the opinion which Octavia and Pauline had already formed, to the effect that the ladies were most probably of rank and that the names of *Smith* and *Mordaunt* were assumed. But with regard to the terms on which Mr. Thurston had consented to take charge of the child, and the payment of the large sum of ten thousand pounds, Mr. Clarendon still remained ignorant — inasmuch as his daughters themselves were unacquainted with these arrangements.

Relative to Mr. Harley not a word was said; and we need scarcely observe that an equal silence was observed in reference to the visit of Lord Florimel. For these were secrets which the young ladies had obvious reasons for cherishing.

CHAPTER XXV.

A NIGHT OF TERRORS.

It was evening—half-past nine on the second evening of Caroline Walters' residence in the house of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife.

The young girl was seated alone in her chamber, listening to the hurricane that raged without: for the gale blew in terrific blasts—now rushing over the turbid Thames as if with a violence and a power sufficient to hurl down the very bridges themselves, —then sweeping along the narrow street, and apparently enveloping that particular house with all its whirlwind might,—now lulling for a short interval into a dreary succession of moaning sounds,—and then, again collecting its appalling energies for a renewal of its tempestuous fury.

The chamber allotted to the young girl was on the second floor, and at the back of the house. Its windows therefore looked upon the Thames: but as the river, even at full tide, was much lower than the street, that casement was a considerable height above the water.

And it was full tide now—and, as she sate in her room, Caroline could hear, during each occasional

all of the wind-storm, the plash of the rapid current against the piles which served as buttresses to the foundations of the dwelling. Those sounds, so ominous and drear, struck terror to her heart: for they seemed mingled with the moans of drowning men—and the thought that a watery grave lay ready there, beneath the very window, was suggestive of horrible ideas of suicide as a relief to this world's care and suffering! Yes: it was but a step—a single step that lay between the unhappy girl and the waters of oblivion;—and yet she dared not take it—Oh! no—no!

Nevertheless, who at that moment was so wretched as Caroline? All the circumstances of her past life and her present position were present to her memory with the vividness of stationary lightning—if such a phenomenon could possibly have existence. She was an orphan—and she retained the fondest recollections of dear and loving parents, now no more: she had been left to the care of Mrs. Brace, whom she had looked upon as her only friend, and who, while affecting to perform a mother's part, had thrown the unprotected girl in the way of the systematic seducer! *Him* she had loved—madly, fervently loved; and in *his* presence her looks had beamed with a radiance more divine and a brilliance more warm than the scorching rays of that land to which her mother had belonged and where she herself first saw the light. For Spanish blood flowed in her veins, and imparted a higher glow to her transparent brunette complexion than characterises English beauty! But when she had surrendered the only earthly treasure which she possessed—her virtue—to him who had won her young heart's best and purest affections, she soon—Oh! too soon—perceived that it was not love which she had read in his impassioned looks, but a gross sensuality that when appeased left him comparatively cold and distant. For some time did she close her eyes as well as she was able to this sickening—desolating truth; and when she found herself in a way to become a mother, she was fond, and confiding, and sanguine enough to hope that he would fulfil all his promises—accomplish all his vows—and give a father's honourable name to the child that was in due time to be ushered into the world. He did not spurn her—he did not even disdain her prayer, it is true: but he replied in a manner that left her only to persist in hoping on even against the destruction of hope itself. Then came the necessity of her retirement to the midwife's abode: and here we now find her,—alone in her chamber—in a solitude made more terrible by her own distracting thoughts.

O God! how often is it that woman is destined to pour out the divinest flood of her bosom's affections and her soul's sympathies into a heart which is hollow, vacant, and unfilled to the last!—how often does woman—beautiful, adorable woman—perish miserably through the vileness of that man's heart which is thus unworthy to receive that torrent of holiest devotion—that full tide of purest love! And how often it is, great heaven! that not only does one woman pine and die for such a heart,—but that a hundred living, bursting female hearts are doomed to perish wretchedly, wretchedly for the infamy of one man!

But if Caroline Walters could no longer live for love—yet she might still live on for vengeance! A great change had come over the young girl during the twenty-four hours which she had now passed beneath the midwife's roof. She no longer attempted to veil from her sight the misery of her position. Lost—betrayed—abandoned by him whom she had adored, the full measure of his deceit and treachery developed itself, in all its black details, to her appalled understanding. Then came jealousy, too,—running like the bursting of a pent-up torrent through every avenue of her soul;—and she felt assured that she had been deserted for some other fair one! Her Spanish blood boiled like a lava-stream in her veins;—and a thirst for vengeance, acquiring all the intensity of a ferocious passion, penetrated like a consuming flame into the very depths of the young girl's being!

The dark nature of her thoughts scared her, as she thus sate ruminating in her lonely chamber. The ideas upon which her bewildered mind settled itself—ideas urging her Spanish nature to revenge—appeared to be a crime. But the longer she studied them—the more she dwelt upon them, the less startling did they become. And then arose new sources of terror in the influence which the raging wind-storm without and the plashing of the turbid waters below exercised upon her soul;—and lastly came those thoughts of suicide, which convulsed her entire frame with ineffable horror.

But, no—no: she must live for vengeance!

Rising from her seat, and casting a hurried glance around the chamber,—which was small, but neatly furnished, though gloomy in its aspect,—she felt that she must do something to occupy her mind. She knew that she could not sleep even if she retired to her couch;—and her utter loneliness alike of position and of mind, began to have an influence over her which was intolerable.

What if she were to seek an hour's companionship with one of the four young females to whom she had been introduced, and with whom she had passed the greater portion of the day? They were kind and compassionate towards her: for they were in a condition even to afford consolation, inasmuch as they did not feel their own degraded state as deeply and as severely as Caroline felt her's.

Yes: she would stealthily seek the chamber of some one of those young women; for every instant was the awful sense of solitude becoming more difficult to endure.

Taking the candle in her hand, she stole noiselessly forth from her room: but when she found herself in the large landing outside, and beheld three or four doors besides her own opening thence, she knew not at which to knock.

After hesitating for a few moments, she blamed herself for her irresolution; and, tapping gently at the door of the chamber precisely opposite, waited for the answer. None reached her ear: and, growing positively terrified by the deep silence which reigned throughout the house and which had in it something mysteriously awful at the time when the wind was roaring in such terrific gusts without, she opened the door. A glance into the room convinced her that it was not a sleeping-chamber nevertheless, an unaccountable feeling of curiosity prompted her to enter. She crossed the threshold and advanced, holding the candle high up so as to obtain a complete view of the place.

It was a lumber-room, where broken furniture and articles not in use were stowed away; and it had that peculiar disagreeable, earthly smell which invariably prevails in apartments constantly shut

up, and where old wooden things are mouldering with the process of decay. To the walls were suspended bunches of herbs of various kinds, hung there to dry; and amongst them was a considerable quantity of savin, the detestable use of which in such hands as those of Mrs. Lindley, was to produce abortion. But of this fact Caroline Walters was happily ignorant: otherwise, it would only have increased the sentiment of aversion which she already experienced with regard to the midwife.

Nevertheless, if the sight of those herbs produced no unpleasant effect upon the young girl, she was speedily horrified and startled by other spectacles which this room presented. For, ranged upon a shelf stood several glass jars, each containing the diminutive corpse of an infant preserved in spirits of wine. Yielding to an invincible impulse of curiosity, but with a cold tremor of the frame, Caroline advanced to scan these objects nearer; and as she gazed with mingled loathing and fearful interest, she discovered something connected with each tiny body that enhanced the poignancy of those feelings. For they were monsters—human monsters—which were preserved in those bottles, and on which the eyes of the young girl were thus fixed!

That those infants had died at their birth, was probable: that some, if not all, had been murdered, either by stifling or poison, was not very unlikely; —but this latter idea did not for a moment strike Caroline Walters. All her thoughts were absorbed in the loathsome monstrosities which she was contemplating. For in one jar was an infant with an enormous protuberance, having the appearance of an immense wen, upon one side of its little head: another contained a child of hideous features and without any arms;—a third displayed the horrid spectacle of twin bodies with one head—the revolting production of nature thus having four arms and four legs;—and a fourth vase contained an infant corpse that had neither arms nor legs at all. In fine, these specimens of the terrible eccentricities which occasionally come within the cognizance of those who practise midwifery, were amongst the most revolting which the annals of the art have ever recorded.

Turning away at length from the disgusting exhibition, and with such a sickening sensation at the heart that she was forced to place the candle-stick upon a table for fear she should drop it and be left in the dark amidst those horrors, Caroline leant against the wall for support. While thus sustaining herself, and wondering what sentiment of curiosity could have originally prompted her to enter the room at all, she cast her eyes around as if fearful lest some terrific spectre should suddenly rise from amidst the pile of lumber or appear upon the threshold of the door,—when her looks settled upon a tall black wooden case, standing upright against the wall.

Again she shuddered with a cold trembling from head to foot: for this box at first struck her as being a coffin that was planted there! But a second and more searching glance showed her that it had not that angular projection of the sides which marks the sinister shape of the receptacle for the dead.

And now that same mysterious and invincible curiosity which had already influenced her on this eventful evening, once more impelled her to approach the object of her attention: and observing that the case had a door hung on hinges and fastened by means of a small latch, she was prompted to open it.

The door swung back: but no pen can describe the terror which seized upon the young woman when the bleached bones of a skeleton were suddenly revealed to her view.

The consternation which fell upon her, stifled the cry that rose to her lips: and for nearly a minute she was held as it were motionless—petrified—statue-like,—and yet with her very flesh creeping. Horror seized upon her brain: the effect was as if the Medusa's head had thus abruptly met her eyes—turning her to stone. While this appalling influence lasted, by no human effort could she have averted her gaze from the anatomy: a supernal power appeared to rivet her looks on the whitened skeleton!

And that skeleton!—it appeared to be standing upright in its case—for it was fastened by the head to the top thereof: its long fingers were slightly bent—its toes pointed downward;—it seemed to grin horribly with its two rows of white and perfect teeth,—and Caroline thought that with its eyeless sockets it looked with a stony and death-like gaze upon her.

At the same moment that this appalling spectacle was displayed to her view,—appalling we say, considering her state of mind,—the wind came roaring, rushing, and bellowing down upon the house with such fury that it shook to its very foundation;—and for an instant the thought flashed to the girl's imagination that the day of judgment was at hand.

A draught swept through the chamber in spite of the well-closed windows with their shutters inside and their large wooden shades without,—for this room looked into the street,—and, agitated by that piercing, penetrating gust, the herbs rustled against the wall like the garments of some being approaching the young woman from behind—and the bones rattled slightly in the upright box.

A vertigo seized upon the unfortunate Caroline; and, staggering back—but uttering no cry, for her lips were sealed by the feeling that was now passing over her—she sank on a chair that happened to stand near. Wildly she cast her eyes around: objects of terror, conjured up by her excited imagination, met them on every side;—and, she felt as if she were about to go raving mad, when a bell was suddenly rung with violence in the house.

Caroline started from her seat; and all the apparitions which her fancy had depicted, vanished in an instant. The thought flashed to her that some one was up and stirring in the dwelling; and the sensation of utter loneliness abandoned her. It seemed as if something like life and animation had awakened beneath that roof: the certainty sprang up in her mind that should she call out for assistance, succour would come;—and it was even with a courageous feeling that she closed the door of the skeleton's case.

Scarcely had she done this, when the bell was rung furiously a second time;—and Miss Walters hurried back to her own chamber.

Shutting the door as noiselessly as possible, she placed the candle upon the mantel-piece, and seated herself to listen: for she knew that the summons came from one of the chambers tenanted by the midwife's lodgers. Then the thought struck her that Mrs. Lindley, who slept in a room below, would be hurrying up-stairs to answer that bell: and it was probable that she would see the light in Caroline's

chamber gleaming through the key-hole. The young girl, now no longer afraid, thereupon extinguished the candle; and, approaching the door, she held her breath to listen.

Almost immediately afterwards, some one came hurrying up the staircase; and Caroline knew by her step, hasty though it were, that it was Mrs. Lindley. The midwife passed by the young woman's door, but stopped short at the next on the right hand; and Caroline heard her enter the adioining apartment.

That was the chamber occupied by the lady concerning whom *the utmost precaution and secrecy were requisite,—the young lady of high birth, who never quitted her room!*

The wind had experienced some degree of abatement in its violence—and its gusts were less frequent than during the earlier part of the evening But still it gushed along the bosom of the Thames and swept at intervals over the house: and soon those sounds without were mingled with moans of female anguish within. Trembling from head to foot with new and undefined alarms, and experiencing a boundless sympathy for the young lady whom she supposed to be in the agonies of maternity, but whom to her knowledge she had never seen,—Caroline Walters began to feel her Spanish blood boiling with the excitement of an intense loathing in regard to that house of terrible mystery whither shame repaired to hide its head—where children were born heaven only knew how to be disposed of—and where a vile woman throve upon the dark and sinister practice which, as she herself had boasted to Mrs. Brace, never left her chambers untenanted!

For nearly half-an-hour did the moans, varied by occasional subdued screams, continue in the next room;—and all that time Miss Walters remained still and motionless in her own chamber,—but with a fearful excitement rapidly increasing upon her. At length, so heated grew her brain, that she felt she must either have fresh air or be suffocated. The room seemed to have become a coffin: the atmosphere was to her senses as sultry as the torrid glow of the tropics. Nevertheless, it was—as the reader remembers—in the depth of winter; and the blast was blowing without as if it had come laden with the ice-chill of far-off Labrador

Approaching the window, Caroline opened it as noiselessly as she could; and the cutting wind's intensity of cold was lost upon her. It seemed but a gentle breeze that fanned her feverish cheeks and blew back the hair from her countenance.

Dark as pitch was the night without: black as a funereal pall did that darkness seem to hang upon the river and against the house. Not a star peeped forth from above: not even an outline of the tempestuous clouds that were piled one upon another, could be seen;—for it was the very air itself that seemed to be a flood of jet but impalpable ink. The young girl could hear the rush of the river and its constant plashings against the piles below: but there was not a gleam upon its surface—not a mitigated shade to show that it was water running there. All was black—densely, profoundly black, like the interior of a vast cavern whither the light of day penetrated not, and where no lamp illumed the scene.

Yes: it was a night which crime would revel in for its own vile purposes,—a night from which conscience would shrink appalled, when remorse was present,—night that would make the rich rejoice in the possession of their warm rooms and their downy beds, and which at the same time would impel the poor to curse the existence that was doomed to be dragged on in those cold and cheerless garrets where not even a mattress protected the shivering limbs from the hard floor!

For upwards of five minutes had Caroline Walters stood at the window, courting as it were the nipping chill of the wind to cool her brain which seemed to be on fire, and her blood which appeared to circulate like lightning in her veins; when, at the expiration of that brief interval, she heard a neighbouring window gently and slowly open.

Scarcely had this sound fallen upon her ear, when the conviction flashed to her mind that it was the casement of the adjacent room—*the young lady's chamber*—which was thus opening,—and while she was still listening with breathless attention, the faint, feeble, and half-stifled cry of a new-born child was wafted to her through the air.

In the next moment that cry was heard the least thing louder; and immediately afterwards it rose into a small shrill shriek: then there was a plash in the waters beneath,—a sound distinct from the ripplings against the piles, and which seemed as if something had been thrown into the river;—and at the same instant the window of the next room was shut down!

If a scorpion had suddenly twined itself about the neck of Caroline Walters, a more horrible feeling could not have come over her than the sensation which now seized upon her brain—her heart—her entire being. For to her startled soul rushed the appalling conviction that a foul and atrocious murder had just been perpetrated,—the murder of a babe whose eyes had scarcely opened in this world ere they were closed again in the night of death,—and that death inflicted, perhaps—nay, most probably—with the cognizance of the victim's own mother!

Staggering away from the window, the young woman fell upon her knees by the side of her bed; and yielding to the deep agony of feelings so intensely wrung, she buried her face in her hands and endeavoured to pray. But her thoughts grew bewildered—her ideas became confused—and a frightful consternation seized upon her. Rising slowly, she mechanically closed the window, and began to lay aside her clothing;—and had the candle been still burning and she could have caught a glimpse of her features in the mirror, she would have shrunk back in dismay from the reflection of the ghastly pallor of her countenance, the strange unnatural vacancy of her eyes, and the ashy whiteness of her quivering lips.

But it was dark now within that chamber,—dark as the air without,—dark, too, as the deed which characterised this night of terror!

Caroline Walters sought her couch—and sleep soon fell upon her eyes: for she was worn out and exhausted with the overwhelming fatigues which the body had sustained from the mind's incessant workings and convulsive agitations during the last hour. But though slumber thus sealed her heavy lids,—yet to her bosom there came no rest; for even in her dreams was she pursued by the horrors that had appalled her soul ere she lay down to repose.

Yes—and even in her visions, too, it seemed as if an oath of vengeance sprang from her very heart's core,—of vengeance against *him* who had seduced and betrayed her—and against that old demoness in female shape who had perpetrated the tremendous tragedy of this foul night.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRINCE, TIM MEAGLES, AND LADY LETITIA LADE.

WHILE the scenes just related were taking place at the abode of Mrs. Lindley in Fore Street, Lambeth, a conversation replete with interest in regard to our tale, was progressing at Carlton House.

It was about ten o'clock on that night of tempest and of crime, when the Prince of Wales, having quitted the dinner-table in another apartment of his magnificent dwelling, retired to his private chamber, which we have already described in a preceding chapter. Germain, his faithful French valet, was waiting there for any farther instructions which his royal master might have to give; but the Prince, having satisfied himself with a glance at the table that everything requisite had been provided, dismissed his dependant with orders to serve up supper at midnight.

Germain bowed and withdrew; and when he had disappeared, the Prince locked the door by which the man had retired, and immediately afterwards unfastened the one leading to the private staircase. Having done this, the Prince approached the table which was spread with a varied assortment of delicious wines, preserved and hot-house fruits, and cakes of several descriptions; and filling a large glass with claret, he tossed off the contents. Then, throwing himself into an easy chair, the Prince began to hum a tune, in the midst of which occupation he was interrupted by the approach of footsteps on the private stairs.

In a few moments Tim Meagles made his appearance, ushering in the Amazon, as on the previous occasion when we introduced him to the Prince's bed-chamber.

The lady was attired in the same manner as we then described: but, if possible, she was still handsomer—for the cold wind had so heightened the co-

turally healthy hues of her complexion that she seemed radiant with animation. Nevertheless, his Royal Highness could not restrain a movement of impatience when he observed that his friend Meagles had brought her thither again: but the volatile Tim, hastening forward, whispered in the Prince's ear, "I know what you want to see me for—and Lady Letitia can help you."

The countenance of George brightened up immediately; and, rising from his seat, he gave the Amazon a cordial welcome.

Throwing aside her hat and riding-whip, and taking a chair, Lady Letitia Lade smoothed down her glossy black hair and arranged her luxuriant ringlets, exclaiming, "This wind plays the very devil with one's curls. I really think I shall have them cut off altogether."

"It were the veriest sacrilege perpetrated against Nature's shrine of loveliness that a Vandal imagination could possibly conceive," observed the Prince, smiling.

"Egad! that's the prettiest turned compliment I ever heard fall from your lips, my dear Prince," said Meagles; "but I perfectly agree with you in the opinion which it implies."

"Hold your tongue, Tim!" cried the Amazon, laughing so as to display thirty-two of the whitest teeth, which were all perfect as to number and without a speck or blemish; so that no one could complain of the somewhat large mouth which thus revealed the brilliant array. "With the permission of your Royal Highness, I shall help myself," continued Lady Letitia: "for, in spite of your cheerful fire—the flames of which go roaring up the chimney like a broken-winded horse pressed into a gallop, I still feel cold—and a glass of your excellent Madeira will warm me."

"This is Liberty Hall, my dear huntress," said the Prince; "and therefore I shall not even adopt the ceremonious courtesy of filling your glass for you."

"By Jove! she can fill it for herself—and empty it too," cried Tim Meagles—an observation which gained him a smart box on the ear from Lady Letitia.

"Do you treat Sir John in that fashion?" demanded the Prince, laughing.

"Poor old gentleman! he is well nigh in his dotage," said the Amazon. "He let's me do just as I like——"

"And if he didn't, you'd do it all the same,' remarked Tim.

"Most assuredly," responded the huntress. "But as he is indulgent and good, we never have any quarrels. He only sees with my eyes and hears with my ears; and thus we live happily enough together."

"You are particularly fortunate," observed the Prince. "But we must now proceed to business, Meagles. We have two clear hours before us to chat—and supper will be served at twelve."

"I can guess what you require," said Tim: "but I suppose your wants are not very pressing—or else you would not have sent up a note to my lodgings last evening, postponing our appointment until to-night."

"The fact is that four-and-twenty hours made no material difference, as affairs stood," rejoined the Prince of Wales: "but as they *now* stand, another four-and-twenty hours must not be allowed to pass away without seeing my coffers replenished."

"What is the matter, then?" demanded Meagles "Anything particularly pressing?"

"That poor devil Foster, who lent me the fifteen thousand pounds, you know—upon my simple note of hand—three years ago——" began the Prince of Wales, speaking hurriedly.

"Why! I thought your Royal Highness had settled it last Christmas twelvemonth," interrupted Meagles. "Did I not make an arrangement with him for you?—and did I not even find you the money to hand over to him? He agreed to receive the principal, and waive all claim to the twenty-five per cent. interest."

"It is perfectly true, my dear Meagles," resumed George, as he sipped his wine, "that you did everything you have just stated: but it is equally true that the money which you procured for me on that occasion, went into—some other channel."

"And yet you never mentioned that circumstance to me until now," observed Tim, somewhat reproachfully. "How can I possibly undertake to settle these kinds of things for your Royal Highness, when you constantly act in a different manner from what I suggest or arrange, and then leave me completely in the dark?"

"I do not consider that you have a right to catechise me thus, Mr. Meagles," said the Prince, haughtily. "If it be irksome or unpleasant to you to attend occasionally to my business——"

"Irksome and unpleasant be hanged!" exclaimed Tim. "What I meant was, that your Royal Highness places me in such a position at times that I should look like a fool were I, for instance, to meet this man Foster——"

"The fact is," interrupted Lady Letitia, "Tim Meagles is anxious never to look otherwise than like a sapient fellow, as he is."

"A thousand thanks, my dear huntress, for taking my part!" exclaimed the Prince, now thinking it politic to resume his good humour. "Come, Meagles—give me your best attention—and let us see what can be done in this difficulty."

"We shall be sure to overcome it," remarked Tim, quite satisfied with the little amount of independent spirit which he had just shown, and which was only displayed for the purpose of disarming Lady Letitia of any suspicion that she might have formed to the effect that he was nothing more than the Prince's servile toad-eater and did not dare to call his soul his own. "Pray proceed, my illustrious friend: I am all attention."

"Well, you must know that this unfortunate fellow Foster is on the very verge of bankruptcy—*that's* what I think they call it amongst trading people," continued his Royal Highness, with a supercilious smile of contempt for that mighty industrious class upon whose hard earnings and incessant toils the unprincipled voluptuary was living in a luxurious indolence and an execrable dissipation. "It appears," proceeded the Prince, "that Foster has met with sad reverses, and that unless he can pay a sum of between fourteen and fifteen thousand pounds by three o'clock to-morrow, he will be irremediably ruined. Now, the fact is that the other evening I agreed to meet him at the very tavern where three years ago he lent me the cash; for you know that I have a desperate aversion to any of those tradesmen-fellows setting foot within these walls."

"And very proper too," remarked the Amazon, totally unmindful of the little circumstance that she

was born of parents who were beggars, and in a miserable garret in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles's.

"Well," resumed the Prince, "I went to the place of appointment—it was the George and Blue Boar, Holborn; and on arriving there, I ordered the landlord, who immediately recognised me, to show me to a private room. Conceive my annoyance when I learnt that there was not an apartment unoccupied throughout the establishment: the entire building was full of guests. Even the landlord's own parlour was engaged for a supper-party. There was no help for it—and I was compelled to repair to the commercial-room, having previously informed the landlord that if any one called to inquire for a Mr. Jenkins, the individual was to be conducted straight to me. I had not been long seated in the travellers' room, as they call it, when I observed, as I was sipping my rum punch, that an insolent rascal of a bagman was surveying me in a very peculiar fashion; and he presently had the impertinence to intimate that he was not unaware who I was. Vainly did I endeavour to rebuke him by reminding him that the mere fact of my being there at all was a sufficient indication of my desire to escape vulgar notice: the scoundrel was unabashed, and boldly declared that my words had confirmed his suspicion relative to my identity. Indignant and disgusted—repenting, too, of my folly in going thither under any circumstances whatsoever—and observing by the clock that it was considerably past the hour when Foster was to meet me, I quitted the tavern abruptly: but knowing how absolutely necessary it was to make immediate arrangements with that same Foster, in order to prevent him from calling and dunning at Carlton House, I resolved to proceed to his own private residence. I accordingly took a hackney-coach in Holborn: but when some distance up the Edgeware Road, in which neighbourhood Foster dwells, I became aware that I was pursued. Instantly suspecting some freak arising from the impertinence of the bagman—and fearing lest a disturbance might ensue and obtain publicity, thereby causing unpleasant mention to be made of my name—I alighted, dismissed the coach, and took refuge in the nearest house."

"A very unpleasant little adventure," observed Lady Letitia, laughing heartily.

"I only wish that I had been with your Royal Highness," said Tim Meagles: "that same insolent bagman should not have escaped with a whole skin. But the end of it was, I suppose, that you failed to see Foster altogether?"

"Precisely so," answered the Prince. "And now, to make a long story short, I have received a letter from Foster, respectfully apologising for being too late to meet me the other night at the tavern, but assuring me that he is a ruined man unless he can pay a certain mercantile firm in Wood Street the sum of fourteen thousand five hundred pounds by three o'clock to-morrow. Now, can anything be done, Tim?" inquired the Prince anxiously: "for I pledge you my royal honour that I know not whence to procure half the amount. My name is already talked about in so scandalous a manner—my immense liabilities are as notorious as they well can be—and my position, in fact, is so extremely disagreeable at this moment, that I would make any sacrifice to be enabled to settle this Foster's claim. Only conceive, my dear friends," added the Prince, looking first at Meagles and then at the Amazon,—"only conceive what a terrible exposure it would be, Foster was to become bankrupt and in his vexatio should proclaim me as the cause of his failure!"

"Can your friend manage it in time, Letitia?" asked Meagles, turning towards the huntress.

"As early to-morrow as his Royal Highness ma choose to appoint," was the lady's reply.

"The fact is this," resumed Tim, addressing hin self to the Prince: "our Amazonian beauty here h captivated a French Marquis ——"

"No scandal, Meagles!" interrupted the huntres "The Marquis de Saint Croix is a friend of Sir John —and in that capacity he has visited at our hous He is one of those noble refugees who have bee compelled to seek an asylum in England, .. avoi the guillotine in their own country."

"Perdition seize those miscreants of French Re publicans!" ejaculated the Prince of Wales, sud denly becoming much excited. "Their pestilenti doctrines are making vast progress here: "bu thank God! we possess generals who will not hes tate to cannonade the people at the first symptom a rising. Nevertheless, Royalty has begun to fall a discount ——"

"Your Royal Highness is wrong to suppose th such is the case in England," observed Meagle "The aristocracy has got such a tight hold upon th millions that a convulsion here is impossible."

"Well—at all events, the throne will last my tim out," observed the Prince; "and I don't care o damn what follows!"*

"Oh! leave politics alone for the present," ex claimed Lady Letitia; "and let us return to th matter whence you have both digressed. The Ma quis de Saint Croix, of whom I was speaking, is a old nobleman of very venerable appearance; an he has quite won Sir John's heart. The consequenc is that he is a frequent visitor at our house, as I ju now observed; and a few days ago he was sayin that he had succeeded in bringing away with hin from his native land, a sum of not less than twent thousand pounds. He is anxious to lay out hi money to the best advantage, and consulted my hu band upon the subject. Sir John replied that h would mention the business to his solicitor, wh might probably know where to place the amount o some safe mortgage, and at good interest. I hap pened to mention this circumstance to our frien Meagles ——"

"And I immediately suggested that perhaps you Royal Highness would like to take up the sum added Tim. "Letitia says that she can manage easily, and without delay."

"And what security can I possibly give the Ma quis?" inquired George.

"Your Royal Highness's bond will doubtless b sufficient," answered Meagles.

"And the French nobleman will rejoice in havin deposited his money in such good hands," observe the Amazon. "He will consider the transaction a guarantee for the continuation of that hospitalit and protection which England has already vouchsafe not only to himself, but to so many thousands of h refugee fellow-countrymen."

"But the affair must be managed with the utmo secrecy," said the Prince. "How can you even pr vent your husband, Sir John Lade, from knowin it?"

* George the Fourth, when Prince of Wales, really d make use of these very words.

"Leave that to me," returned the Amazon. "If your Royal Highness shall think fit to embrace the proposal, I will undertake to bring the Marquis de Saint Croix hither to-morrow, at any specified hour—a bond can be already prepared, blanks being left for the names of lender and borrower and the amount to be thus advanced—and all can be settled in a few minutes."

"I cannot possibly refuse so excellent an offer, my dear huntress," answered the Prince. "We will say at one o'clock to-morrow: there will, then, be plenty of time to forward the fifteen thousand pounds to Foster, as he is not compelled to make his payment before three."

This matter being so far settled to the satisfaction of his Royal Highness, the conversation turned upon other topics, and the wine circulated freely—Lady Letitia by no means sparing the light vintage of France.

At midnight the Prince desired Tim Meagles to unlock the door communicating with the ante-room; and Germain almost immediately made his appearance, followed by two footmen bearing the supper-trays.

When the table was spread, and the two subordinate lacqueys had retired, Germain said to the Prince, "May it please your Royal Highness, a very obtrusive person called about an hour ago, and insisted upon obtaining an interview with your Royal Highness."

"Did he give his name?" demanded the Prince, his countenance flushing with indignation.

"He announced himself as a Mr. Foster," was the reply. "But knowing that your Royal Highness was engaged, I would not on any account permit him to enter farther than the hall."

"Did the porters overhear anything that he said, Germain?" inquired George.

"It was in consequence of a species of altercation which took place between him and them, that I was summoned to the hall, may it please your Royal Highness."

"And what—what did the insolent fellow dare to say in the hearing of my menials?" demanded the Prince, now stammering with the excitement and irritability that were gaining upon him.

"Nothing more than that it would be ruin to him unless he either obtained an audience or received an answer to a letter which he had addressed a day or two ago to your Royal Highness," responded Germain, who throughout this colloquy had spoken in the subdued tone of the profoundest respect, and as if he were only relating a very ordinary and commonplace occurrence, instead of something so exceedingly derogatory to his master.

"That will do," said the Prince; "you may retire. "My dear friends," he continued, as soon as the valet had withdrawn, "you perceive how these insolent City people dun you to death if you happen to put them to any little trifling inconvenience. But, thanks to your project, my sweet huntress, Tim Meagles will be enabled to take Foster his money to-morrow—and I shall be freed from all alarm on the part of this pestering trader. So we will think no more about him for the present—but only study how to enjoy ourselves for the next two or three hours to come."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TOO LATE!

"ANY little trifling inconvenience!"—these were the words that the Prince of Wales applied to the ruinous embarrassments into which he himself had been the means of plunging a highly respectable merchant of the City of London!

And it is always with similar levity that the aristocracy speak of the applications made to them by their tradesmen for money, no matter how long it may have been owing. In their estimation they confer an honour upon the shopkeepers with whom they deal; and therefore the vile plebeians must await their patrician convenience! What—dare to ask for payment of a bill—or even a small sum on account? Who ever heard of such insolence? Withdraw your custom immediately, ye proud ones, from such unmannerly fellows! What is it to you if such timely liquidation would rescue an industrious, hard-working man from bankruptcy and his children from the workhouse?—what is it to you if even the regular payments of your bills would save honest traders from the most cruel embarrassments?—what is it to you if the whole community of artizans, mechanics, and operatives be doomed to suffer, throughout its various ramifications and in all its manifold sections, in consequence of your want of punctuality? Nothing—nothing; you care not a straw for the miseries which ye thus entail upon the world of industry!

Show us a class of persons, on the face of God Almighty's earth, more thoroughly heartless than the English aristocracy. No—you cannot! There exists not an oligarchy in the world so devoid of proper feelings as that which comprises the nobility and the fashion of this realm. Talk of the donations which they make to charitable institutions—it is a despicable farce! They only give where they know their names will be proclaimed by canting saints at Exeter Hall, or published in the columns of the daily newspapers. And even if they were really charitable and truly bounteous,—even if they gave largely to the deserving poor, and dispensed gold by handfuls in secret benevolence,—they would only be rendering back to the people a portion of that inordinate wealth which they derive from the thews, sinews, fibres, vitals, and heart's blood of the toiling—wretched—starving millions!

"Any little trifling inconvenience!"—and yet thousands of respectable tradesmen have been ruined by the disgraceful delays of their aristocratic customers and patrons in liquidating their accounts. How much misery has the Duke of York caused in this manner? And yet a column is erected to his memory! Is it not a Column of Infamy?

While the Prince of Wales was uttering those words — "any little trifling inconvenience" — a wretched, broken-hearted, despairing man was returning to his home in the Edgeware Road. *Home!*—how often had that delightful name cheered John Foster's spirits as he breathed it to himself whil toiling at his desk in the City!—how often had th thought of that home inspired him with energy and courage to pass through the laborious routine of the day, by holding forth the delightful assurance that happy faces and a social hearth would await his return to his own abode in the evening!

But now,—*now*, as he was wending his way back

to that dwelling,—he felt that it could no longer be called his home. For a home means something stationary, fixed, and permanent—not precarious and liable to be snatched away in a moment,—a place of one's own choosing, and to which there is a certainty of returning to-morrow and next day, even as one returns to it to-day,—a tenement around whose walls the eye may glance with the satisfaction of knowing that everything contained within their boundary is one's own. Whether it be a single apartment, or a lordly mansion, it is nevertheless a home so long as the conviction lasts that no man can deprive you of it—no one thrusts you forth at will—no rude hand lay its gripe upon the beds, the chairs, and the tables which it contains.

Therefore was it that, as the wretched John Foster, retraced his way to the house in which he had dwelt for so many years, he no longer considered it to be his *home!* No: ruin was imminent,—total, irremediable, unmitigated ruin;—and bankruptcy would sweep away his furniture—bankruptcy would sell the lease of his house—and bankruptcy would turn him, his wife, and his daughter into the streets!

Wretched—wretched man!—how had he deserved this hard fate? From his youth upward had he toiled unweariedly,—first to make his way in the world—next to maintain the position he had achieved for himself—then to improve it—and lastly to sustain it against the difficulties which sprang up, through various causes, around him. Beginning life with nothing, he had succeeded at the age of thirty in exchanging the servitude of a clerkship for the independence of a master: at forty he married a woman who brought him a tolerable sum of money;—at fifty he was rising to opulence—at fifty-five he was enabled to lend the Prince of Wales fifteen thousand pounds, being all the money he had succeeded in putting by during his life of industry—and at fifty-eight, the failure of several eminent houses had so embarrassed his own resources that he was trembling on the verge of bankruptcy.

Messrs. Hodson and Horley, of Wood Street, Cheapside, had threatened to strike a docket against him. Vainly had he besought more time—none was granted. A greedy lawyer, anxious for a job, was employed against him; and, as no character is more estimable than an honest attorney, so none is more execrable than a griping pettifogger. Foster's only resource lay in the money which the Prince owed him. Were that repaid, he could settle the only pressing liability he had in the world; and thereby gaining time to collect his assets which were far greater than his debts, he would continue to hold up his head as a prosperous merchant.

We have seen that he unfortunately missed his appointment with the Prince at the George and Blue Boar. And yet we hardly know whether we be justified in using the term "unfortunately;" for his Royal Highness could not have paid him, had they met. Next we find him addressing a respectful letter to the Prince,—humbly imploring the restoration of his money: not appealing to the *honesty*, but to the *humanity* of his royal debtor;—not confidently demanding his own, as a right, but servilely beseeching payment as a boon. For this is the manner in which Princes must be addressed—and they are not *letters* which you write to them, but *petitions!*

But to that appeal no answer was returned. It was quite sufficient if his Royal Highness deigned to give the subject a thought: how could he be expected to trouble himself so far as to pen a reply? Driven almost to desperation—perceiving Ruin standing in his presence, with only the interval of a few short hours—and having his heart filled with a boundless sympathy for that wife who for eighteen years had been a true and faithful companion to him, and for that daughter of sixteen who was so beautiful and innocent, and whom he loved so fondly,—the merchant had at length resolved to call at Carlton House. Thither he repaired; and, in a mild and respectful voice, solicited a few moments' audience of the Prince. The hall-porters judged that he was a dun, and met his civility with coarse and brutal insult. Still did John Foster preserve his temper: still did he forbear to utter anything disrespectful towards the Prince;—but he implored one of the insolent, powdered, and lace-bedizened menials to bear a message to his Royal Highness. The request was refused with a positive ruffianism of manner;—and Foster, sinking upon one of the chairs in the marble hall, gave way to his grief. Then was it that Germain was sent for; and the merchant, addressing that valet with as much respect as if he were a great lord and Foster himself a grovelling beggar, earnestly besought either an instant's audience of the Prince or an answer to a letter which he had previously forwarded. Germain declared that it was impossible to disturb his royal master at that hour: but he spoke in a respectful—almost kind tone. Then was it that Foster, driven to despair, exclaimed that he should be ruined unless one or the other of his requests was granted. Germain still refused to interfere—and the merchant dragged himself away from the princely dwelling, in a state of mind which it is scarcely possible to explain.

Oh! there are times when the brain reels with a sense of misery—misery—misery, from which no means of escape appear, and to which no relief can come,—times when the soul is filled with an anguish beyond the limits of the imagination to conceive, and when every chord in the heart is so distended that it feels as if the whole must give way at once and the victim be stricken down in sudden death, as if by the thunderbolt of apoplexy!

Such were the sensations of the merchant as he mechanically pursued his way homeward. Though his dwelling was at some considerable distance, he thought not of taking a vehicle. A vehicle indeed! What—when he could see RUIN staring at him with its spectral eyes—preceding him, with its ghastly countenance turned towards him—following him—walking on his right hand and on his left—hemming him in, as it were, with that terrible influence which made it appear of multiform shape! And as he threaded the crowded streets,—walking on like a drunken man, unconscious which way he was pursuing, yet mechanically taking the direct route,—he beheld not the people who jostled him—heard not the gibes which thoughtless young men threw at him—noticed not the frail girls who saluted him with obscene jests—marked not the carriages sweeping along the thoroughfares which he crossed: no—nothing did he see save the gaunt, spectral, and terrific form of RUIN;—nothing did he hear but the silent voice which thundered through his brain the deafening word "RUINED!"

It was midnight when he reached his house

which was only at a short distance from Paradise Villas. Lights gleamed from the parlour-windows —and he knew that anxious hearts were beating within. For he had no secrets from his wife and daughter: they knew all—and now they were waiting to know the worst. But he paused on the steps for upwards of two minutes ere he could command the courage and the energy sufficient to raise his hand to the knocker. How could he meet them face to face, and say, "I am ruined?"—how could he encounter their earnest, inquiring gaze, and proclaim that hope was gone? For doubtless they were hoping still;—yes—and cheering each other, —mother and daughter each striving and straining her utmost to sustain the spirits of the other! My God—how could he cast the blight of despair upon all those tender sympathies—those pious assurances—those holy consolations? Yet it must be done: sooner or later the blow would arrive—sooner or later must the storm of ruin level the castles which hope was building on the unstable sand that it mistook for a firm rock! Oh! unhappy—doomed family!

Foster knocked at the door—and immediately afterwards his ear caught the rustling of dresses and the rapid tread of light feet in the hall within. The door was opened hastily—anxious voices welcomed him, and in the same breath inquired what news he had brought: and he remained standing motionless on the threshold—and spoke no word. For before him were his wife and daughter—the two beings whom he loved so well, and to save whose hearts a pang he would cheerfully lay down his existence,—aye—and smile in the midst of that self-martyrdom!

The light of the hall-lamp fell upon his countenance—and they saw that it spoke terrible things. Then they knew the worst!

Now, had he entered in an excited manner and at once proclaimed the full extent of *his* misery—which was also *their* misery—they would doubtless have burst into a violent ebullition of grief. But when they saw that *he* — the husband and the father—was as it were stunned and stupified by the immensity of the sorrow that weighed upon him, they instantly revealed themselves in the true nature of Woman—blessed Woman!—and became comforters and consolers.

"Dearest — dearest husband," murmured the wife, endeavouring to smile,—"all may not be as bad as you apprehend!"

"Beloved father," whispered the daughter, succeeding in *her* attempt to smile—but it was through glistening tears; "you have given me a good education—I possess accomplishments—and I can work to maintain us all!"

Then the full tide of ineffable emotions rushed to the heart of the ruined merchant who was so tenderly adjured by a wife and so affectionately addressed by a daughter;—and entering the house he folded them both in his embrace, and wept over them plenteously! But such was the state of his mind that those tears gave him no real relief: they only forced his sorrow to take, as it were, a new phase—for inasmuch as he had been stupified and stunned by its weight before, he was now writhing with an anguish that penetrated into the lowest confines of his being. Even though smiles had expanded over him like sunlight, they would only have served to bring unto stronger relief the desert-like desolation of that future on which those whom he loved so well were about to enter.

Mastering, however, his emotions as well as he was able, Foster described the failure of his visit to Carlton House. Then came from his wife's lips the tremulous, hesitating question whether Hodson and Morley would not accord him a farther delay.

"No—not an hour—not a minute!" answered the merchant, almost distracted; and he dashed his open palm violently against his brow.

"My dearest husband," said Mrs. Foster, "there is One above who hears our words and watches our ways; and if it should please Him to rescue us from ruin, penury, and want, even at the last instant will succour and salvation come."

But the afflicted man shook his head despairingly: his sorrow was too great for the consolations of religion.

His daughter—a lovely girl of sixteen, and to whom her fond parents had given the sweet name of Rose, as if in her earliest infancy they foresaw the beauty into which the then delicate flower was destined to expand,—this charming creature, we say, now exerted all the influence of the tenderest endearments and all the power of language to solace her distressed father. But suddenly his countenance grew strange and fearful: then a wild laughter wavered upon his lips—and, springing from his seat, he began to toss his arms about and rave as if in the fever of a delirium.

His wife and daughter threw themselves on their knees before him, and besought him to be calm This touching spectacle and still more earnest appeal produced an almost instantaneous effect upon him: the wild laughter and the indistinct ravings were speedily lost in profound sobbings and suffocating sighs—and these were in their turn subdued by copious weeping and quenched by floods of tears.

Considerably tranquillised, Mr. Foster at length suffered himself to be conducted to his chamber Sleep fell upon him: but his misfortunes pursued him in his dreams—and he awoke at an early hour unrefreshed. He raised his heavy eye-lids—and the first objects his languid looks encountered were his wife and daughter. They had not retired to rest all night: their patient, holy, and affectionate vigil had been wakefully kept!

Oh! who can estimate the devotion of woman? —who can define a limit to her generous sympathies? Unto what can we liken the boundless love of which her heart is susceptible? To the elastic air which is capable of an expansion so vast that a cubic inch may dilate to a volume filling all space, infinite though it be! Yes—to the air, so falsely called empty, let us assimilate woman's love. For even as that same atmosphere is filled with the perfume of flowers a million times mingled, so is woman's love fraught with all those sentiments of the soul that are in themselves a delicious essence and a fragrant balm:—again, as the air becomes the medium of wafting all the harmonies of nature to the ear, so is woman's love breathed in melodious tones, combining all the modulations of her tenderest sensibilities;—and, lastly, even as the atmosphere is radiant with the lustre of the orb of day, so does woman's love diffuse its brightness from beaming eyes and in sunny smiles!

Oh! thou vile, ruthless ruffian that could raise thine hand against a woman!—Oh! thou black-

hearted wretch that could remain unmoved by the tears which thine own ill-treatment has provoked! Knowest thou not what woman's love is? It would prompt her to die for thee—to lay down her life to save thine or the lives of her children? She has her faults, her failings, and her caprices: but, O man! pardon them—pardon them—for they are as nothing in comparison with her devotion, her affection, and her tenderness. As a grain of mustard seed is to the whole earth, so are woman's foibles to her love! But you will point out bad wives—profligate daughters and sisters—abandoned mothers? Alas—alas, it is true—too true: but ask thyself, O Man! who made them thus?—who reduced those wretched creatures to what they are? The reply, if truly given, recoils with a crushing weight of terrible accusation upon thyself! For 'tis *thou* who hast worked all that infernal mischief. Take the vilest of the vile—the most loathsome of the loathsome forms of vice whose features bear the vivid impress of dissipation and debauchery,—and trace this lost one's history of crime back to that moment when virgin innocence was wrecked in guilty enjoyment, and then wilt hear a tale of fervent love on *her* part and cruel deception on that of the seducer! Yes—'tis thou, O Man! who art the most ruthless enemy and the most unrelenting oppressor of that sex to proclaim whose wrongs we have more than once ventured to wield our pen, feeble and ineffectual though our championship may be!

But let us resume the thread of our narrative.

Foster, the ruined merchant, awoke unrefreshed from his slumbers; and when his eyes fell upon the pale and care-worn countenances of those who were so dear to him, he endeavoured to smile his gratitude for the vigil which he saw they had been keeping. But, heavens! so full of uneasy and woe was his smile, that it told too plainly of a mind fast fading with the heart that was breaking within! Both wife and daughter beheld that terrible indication of the mortal shock which he whom they adored had received: but they dared not look at each other, lest they should betray the agonising fears that were now uppermost in their mind.

Mr. Foster rose—performed his toilette with a precision that was habitual, and therefore mechanical in the present instance—and descended to the breakfast-table. He endeavoured to appear tranquil and composed: but the tremendous efforts which he thus made to conceal all that he felt, were only concentrating his emotions with a maddening effect. His wife and daughter implored him not to leave home that day: they dared not offer to accompany him into the City—and they could not suffer him to repair thither alone. With a ghastly look, he murmured an assent to their prayer—adding in a low and hollow tone, "It would be useless even if I were to go!"

The morning wore away—heaven knows how! We cannot pause to conjecture all the feelings and emotions experienced during the few hours which followed the ceremony of sitting down to a breakfast that was removed almost untasted. To attempt such a description would be to undertake the task of showing how human beings can live whole ages of pain and anguish in as many minutes: it would be to depict each throb of a pulse violent with the agitation of delirium—to note each tremor which passed through veins wherein lightning seemed to circulate—and to describe all the spectral shadows which rested upon souls goaded to despair!

As three o'clock in the afternoon drew nigh Mr. Foster's excitement became intolerable. He first began to pace the room with uneven steps, as if his brain were swimming round: then he wandered about the house like a restless spirit. His sorrowing wife and the equally afflicted Rose dared not follow him: they feared to increase the terrible irritability that was gaining so rapidly upon him.

At length three o'clock struck;—and at that moment the ladies were in the parlour on the ground-floor—while Mr. Foster was moving about in the upper part of the house. The door of the parlour was open—and the two unhappy females sate listening in breathless silence: for every time the sounds of the merchant's footsteps ceased to be heard by them—if only for a few moments—a mortal terror seized upon them. And yet they dared not reveal to each other, even by a look, the dreadful apprehensions which they mutually felt.

Presently—soon after the clock in the kitchen had struck three—Mr. Foster was heard to enter his dressing-room. His wife knew that he had pistols there; and, unable any longer to restrain herself, she rushed from the parlour. Rose, animated with a poignant sympathy, hastened to follow her;—and the two ladies were hurrying up the stairs, when the report of fire-arms fell upon their ears. A scream burst from the lips of each: but still they ran—they flew to the dressing-room!

And there—great God! what a spectacle met their horrified vision! He whom they loved was no more. Stretched upon the carpet, with his head frightfully shattered, lay the desperate suicide; while the thin white smoke was curling in wreaths towards the ceiling—and the air was impregnated with the smell of the powder.

With a piercing scream, Rose threw herself upon the corpse of her sire and gave way to all the anguish of her indescribable grief. But the effect produced upon Mrs. Foster was different:—for a few moments—nay, for nearly a minute did she stand transfixed upon the threshold of the chamber—her eyes bent with an awful wildness upon the scene before her. Then, suddenly a rending—thrilling—penetrating shriek burst from her lips,—a lengthened vibration as the heart's chords broke in twain; and she fell headlong—a lifeless corpse by the side of her husband.

At this moment the servants entered the room and Rose was borne away, in a senseless state, to her own chamber.

But scarcely had one of the domestics begun to administer restoratives to the unfortunate girl who had thus suddenly been made an orphan, when a loud double knock at the door called down the other dependant to answer the imperious summons.

The arrival was Mr. Meagles, who came as the bearer of the money which was to satisfy the merchant's claim upon the Prince. The Amazon had introduced the Marquis of Saint Croix to his Royal Highness's private apartment at the very moment that the clock was striking one—and in less than a quarter of an hour the bond was signed and the cash paid down. But the Prince was so much pleased with the old French nobleman that he insisted upon his staying to partake of lunch; and when Tom

Meagles suggested the propriety of devoting immediate attention to Foster's business, the Prince exclaimed flippantly, "Oh! an hour more or less will not make any difference to the vulgar trader: you must stay and take a glass of wine, Tim—and then you shall go." Meagles was forced to comply with his patron's desire; and it was two o'clock ere he quitted Carlton House to go into the City. But having a good horse to his gig, he speedily accomplished the distance between the princely dwelling and the merchant's counting-house. Here he learnt that Mr. Foster had not been in town all day;—and he therefore resolved to proceed at once to the Edgeware Road.

We have however seen that he reached Mr. Foster's private residence *too late!* And now he learnt, with unfeigned horror, the terrible tragedy that had taken place, and which had deprived a young and beautiful girl of both her parents all in a moment.

Meagles entered the house—visited the scene of suicide and sudden death—and, hearing that Miss Foster had by this time recovered her senses, solicited a few moments' interview with her. The man was naturally good-hearted; and the incidents which had just occurred, not only shocked him cruelly, but likewise created in his bosom a feeling of interest with regard to the fatherless and motherless maiden. The servant informed the half-distracted young lady that a gentleman who appeared to sympathize deeply with her sorrows, desired to see her; and she was accordingly persuaded to grant the request.

In a few minutes, therefore, Meagles beheld a tall, graceful, and very lovely girl enter the drawing-room, to which he had been shown; and, although she was nearly overwhelmed with a sense of the tremendous affliction that had fallen upon her, yet was he struck by the beauty of her countenance and the sylph-like elegance of her form.

"Miss Foster," he said, approaching her, and speaking in a low and tremulous tone, "I dare not offer a word of consolation. Were I your friend, I should venture to do so—were I your brother, I should naturally undertake the task. But being a stranger—an utter stranger—I can only say, and with truth, that I never was so profoundly affected in all my life."

Rose bent upon him a look which expressed the deep gratitude she experienced for this manifestation of sympathy: but she was unable to utter a word. Her feelings choked her; and, sinking upon a seat, she burst into tears.

Meagles suffered her to weep without interruption for several minutes, during which she forgot that he was present; and at length raising her countenance—which was as lovely as loveliness could make it, but pale with indescribable woe—she remembered that he had begged to see her upon some matter of importance. Observing that the look which she cast towards him assumed an expression of inquiry—for her heart was still too full to speak—he hastened to explain his business in as few words as possible. But the communication of the fact that he had brought the money with him, only revived her grief in all its bitter intensity: for it struck her in an instant that had he come but five minutes earlier, all—all that had happened would have been spared, and those whom she had lost would be yet alive!

Again, therefore, was she overwhelmed with sorrow for several minutes: but, at length recovering a sufficiency of composure to address a few words to her visitor, she said in a low and stifling tone, "There remains a duty to be performed to the memory of my father. His name must not be disgraced even after death. The money which you have brought was destined for a certain purpose—and that purpose must be accomplished. Do you understand me, sir?"

"You mean the payment of a particular debt, Miss Foster?" observed Meagles. "Give me the address of those harsh creditors, and I will hasten to them without delay."

Rose mentioned the names of Hodson and Morley and their place of business; and Meagles was already about to leave the room, when a thought suddenly struck him. There would be a Coroner's inquest on the bodies—and the name of the Prince might transpire in connexion with the causes that led to the merchant's deplorable suicide!

Turning towards the young lady, he said in the kindest tone that he could command, "But is there no other duty to be performed towards the memory of your deceased father? Must the world become acquainted with the—the ——"

"I understand you, sir—and, Oh! I thank you—sincerely thank you!" exclaimed Rose, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "But is it possible?—can the truth be concealed in this instance?"

"If you, Miss Foster, can rely upon your servants," answered Meagles, "I will undertake that neither the Coroner nor the parish authorities shall exhibit any impertinent curiosity to pry into a secret which ought to be religiously kept."

The afflicted girl extended her hand to Meagles as a proof of her gratitude for what she conceived to be a generous consideration on his part; and he therefore took his leave, with an intimation that he should return in the evening to report the interview with Hodson and Morley, and to give her any advice which she might require in the distressing circumstances in which she was placed.

Accordingly at the expiration of about three hours, Meagles called again, and was immediately admitted into Miss Foster's presence. He found her more calm and resigned; and it was a consolation to the poor orphan, even in the depth of such affliction as this, to learn that the debt was paid to the merchants in Wood Street, and that nothing was to be apprehended on the part of the Coroner. For the magic influence of the Prince's name had been effectually used by Meagles to ensure silence in that quarter, as well as with the parochial authorities.

It was natural that, situated as Rose Foster was, she should receive with attention and gratitude the advice which was now given to her by one whom she already looked upon as a friend sent by heaven to afford counsel and aid in her orphan and unprotected state. She accordingly permitted him to issue all the necessary instructions for the double funeral, which he proposed should take place as soon and as privately as possible; and ere he took leave of her that evening, he insisted upon her retaining in her own charge the few hundreds of pounds which were left out of the fifteen thousand after the liquidation of the debt due to Hodson and Morley.

It was past ten o'clock when Tim Meagles returned to Carlton House, where he immediately obtained a private interview with the Prince.

"Is anything the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness, observing that the countenance of his friend was troubled.

"The money was paid *too late!*" replied Meagles, in a sombre tone.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the Prince impatiently. "I suppose the poor devil has gone into the *Gazette*——eh?"

"He has gone to another world," answered Meagles; "and this affair does not constitute the finest chapter in the life of your Royal Highness."

"Explain yourself, man!" ejaculated the Prince, stamping his foot with increasing impatience and likewise through rage at the taunt so boldly thrown out against him.

"I mean that John Foster has blown his brains out—and that his wife has died of a broken heart," said Meagles, still speaking in a tone of reproach.

"By heaven! this is awkward," cried the Prince, turning pale. "There will be a Coroner's Inquest—a thorough exposure——"

"No — I have stopped all *that*," interrupted Meagles. "I called upon the Coroner and said enough to induce him to take no notice of the affair I likewise bribed the parish beadle, sexton, and clerk very heavily."

"Thank God!" exclaimed his Royal Highness; "you are an excellent fellow, Meagles! Of course you have not paid the money to the creditors? Well—perhaps it is better that the vulgar trader should have blown his brains out: it is fifteen thousand pounds saved—and you may keep a thousand for yourself, Tim."

"Indeed your Royal Highness is talking uncommonly fast," said Meagles, scarcely able to repress a feeling of disgust at the thorough heartlessness which the Prince was now exhibiting: "for how could we possibly hush up this most unpleasant affair, without paying Hodson and Morley's claim upon the deceased? *They* knew that your Royal Highness owed Foster the money."

"Ah! I see," observed the Prince, in a tone of vexation. "Well—it can't be helped, Tim. I have

just left half-a-dozen good fellows in the banquetting-room—and you shall join us. We intend to keep it up till three in the morning, and shall put your services in requisition for the curaçoa-punch. Come!"

"Your Royal Highness will excuse me this evening," said Meagles, who for the first time in his life felt indisposed to mix in conviviality.

"Ah! I presume you have some little love-affair in hand," exclaimed the royal voluptuary. "Well—I wish you success. Let me see you to-morrow."

And having shaken hands with his friend, the Prince returned to his companions in the banquetting-room, where he passed the greater portion of the night in dissipation: but during the many hours that thus elapsed, the heartless miscreant never once bestowed another thought upon the Fosters!

Tim Meagles retired to his own lodgings in a pensive mood, the image of the orphan Rose being uppermost in his mind.

But the reader will have observed that, during his interview with the Prince, he never once alluded to her, nor even intimated that there was such a being in existence!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TERRIBLE AND STRANGE REVELATIONS.

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we shall find seated at the breakfast-table with his bride, at their lodgings in Southwark, the morning after the wedding-day.

Julia was dressed in a new stuff gown, and wore a neat cap—had her hair nicely arranged—and altogether appeared rather attractive, as she did the onours of the morning meal to her husband.

Upon this individual's countenance there was an expression of satisfaction which indicated that he was very far from repenting of his matrimonial bargain; and as he drank his chocolate and discussed his eggs and buttered toast, there seemed to be an air of domestic comfort about him, proving how readily he had cast off his bachelor habits and assumed those of a man who enjoys his own fireside.

When breakfast was over, and the servant-girl of the house had cleared away the things, Mr. Page drew his chair closer to his wife; and producing the pocket-book from the bosom of his dressing-gown, he said, with a cunning smile, "I suppose you know *this*, Julia?"

"Yes—it belonged to my father," she replied. "I have often seen him poring over the papers it contains—and he has read most of them to me a great many times."

"Then you know all about the matters they refer to?" remarked Page, interrogatively.

"Most of them, no doubt," returned the young woman. "But how came you by the pocket-book?"

"Your father gave it to me in his dying moments. He could barely gasp forth a few words," continued Page: "and those were scarcely intelligible. Let me see—I think I can recollect them exactly. He said, '*Take that pocket-book——tell Julia——Oh! I am going——My God! mercy—mercy——Hannah——Julia——Oh! pardon——mercy——pardon!*' And then he expired."

"Ah! he was touched with remorse on his death bed," observed Julia, a slight humidity appearing upon her eye-lashes: but, hastily wiping it away, she added, "He was neither a good brother nor a good father; and I suppose that the way in which he had behaved to his sister, and the manner in which he brought me up, troubled him at last. I was a baby when my mother died; and my father neglected me altogether. When I was able to run alone, I was allowed to paddle about in the gutter from morning to night; and all the education I ever had was got at a charity school."

"But you speak very well, my dear, considering that you had so little instruction in your infancy," said Page, chucking her under the chin.

"Oh! I was fond of reading once—and then, my father was a very well-educated man, and it was impossible not to glean something from him: for of late years—since we settled in that court where he died—he always wanted me to be with him as much as possible. He disliked to be alone."

"You think that his conscience was troubled, Julia?" said Page, inquiringly.

"I am sure it was," responded the young woman, emphatically. "But it's not worth while for me to have any particular secrets from you *now*, since we are *one*, as the saying is: and therefore I'll tell you a great many curious things about my father—and also about the matters which some of the papers in that pocket-book refer to."

"Just what I want!" exclaimed Page, drawing his chair still closer to the one which his wife occupied. "It is snowing fast," he continued, glancing over his shoulder at the window; "and we will have a comfortable chat together for an hour or two. If it clears up presently, I will take you out shopping; and then we can have a nice little dinner at a tavern. But all this is on condition that you speak unreservedly, and tell me everything you know. Besides, it will be to your advantage as well as mine—for we may make money by these papers."

"So much the better," observed Julia. "In the first place, then, I must inform you that my father was skilled in chemistry above all things. He was acquainted with many wonderful secrets in that branch, and could compound poisons of the most deadly nature. Oh! my father was a terrible man, though I say it!" she added, with an unaffected shuddering.

"Indeed! But go on," exclaimed Page: "you are not answerable for any of his sins, you know."

"Thank God, I am not!" cried the young woman energetically. "My life has not been very regular, I confess:—but such things as he has done——no, no—never!"

"Don't vex and annoy yourself, Julia," said the commercial traveller, soothingly. "I am dying with impatience to hear what your father did. Pray go on."

"First let us speak of his chemical knowledge," continued Mrs. Page, her excitement almost instantaneously passing away—for she was naturally of a cold and imperturbable disposition. "No man was more expert in that branch than him. He used to compound drugs which produced abortion with ease and never failed in their effects; and all the old midwives in London patronised him."

"God bless my soul—how shocking!" exclaimed Page, involuntarily.

"It is as I tell you," said Julia. "One woman in particular—a Mrs. Lindley, who has a large esta-

blishment in Fore Street, Lambeth—was accustomed to purchase great quantities of him. He likewise compounded a poison one drop of which placed upon the tongue of an infant child, produced immediate death, leaving an appearance as if the poor little being had perished of ordinary convulsions. The midwives used to patronise this mixture also."

"There must be a vast amount of crime in London that I never dreamt of," observed Page, shaking his head solemnly.

"No doubt of it!" ejaculated Julia: then instantaneously resuming her wonted calmness of tone and manner, she said, "But the worst—if anything can be worse than what I have already revealed to you—is to come. My father invented a certain poison which he called the *Heir's Friend*. Do you understand?"

"Not exactly," returned Page. "How do you spell the first word?"

"Oh! I mean the *heir* that expects property, you know, and is waiting for some one to die off," continued Julia. "This poison was of such a nature that no medical man could tell that it had been taken. It baffled all the cleverest physicians in the world; and while they were attributing the victim's disease to a thousand other things, the real cause was nothing more or less than a few drops of this poison administered twice or three times a week. Being colourless and tasteless, it might be mixed with anything."

"These are indeed strange things that you are telling me," said Page, speaking in a low whisper, as if fearful of being overheard. "But what was the effect of the extraordinary poison you are speaking of?"

"Take, for instance, a person in robust health, and who has never known a day's illness," resumed Julia. "Well, you administer a few drops of this liquid to him—and a change comes over him in four-and-twenty hours. His constitution seems to give way suddenly: he grows pale—thin—weak—and sickly. His appetite fails him—he loses all energy, both mental and bodily—and literally perishes before your very eyes. It almost appears as if you can see him withering away; and in a few months he sinks into the grave."

"But this is dreadful!" exclaimed Page, with a cold shudder.

"Did I not tell you that my father was a terrible man?" said the young woman. "Well, you can now understand the reason why this poison is called the *Heir's Friend*. But my father sold very little of it: the traffic was too dangerous—and the price was large in proportion. Moreover he never would dispose of it in a direct way:—only through the agency of a person named Joseph Warren."

"Ah! a scoundrel who is better known as the Magsman?" cried Page, interrogatively.

"The same. Are you acquainted with him?" asked Julia.

"He was the villain who thrust me into the cellar of the den where the man you call Briggs appears to act as jailer," responded the commercial traveller. "But go on: I am deeply—though horribly—interested in all you are telling me. Was there no antidote to the wondrous poison you last spoke of?"

"Yes," answered Julia. "And the most extraordinary part of the whole affair is that even if the victim of that poison is at his last gasp, the antidote will be certain and sure to bring him back to life. It will even go farther—for in a few weeks it will not fail to restore him to all his former health, and gaiety, and appetite, and good looks. This is what my father used to call '*the triumph of the chemical art.*'"

"Triumph indeed!" ejaculated Page: "it is almost incredible!"

"But it is nevertheless true," returned his wife. "I have often and often seen him try the effects of both poison and antidote."

"Julia—you—you—make my hair stand on end!" gasped the commercial traveller, suddenly becoming ashy pale.

"You mistake me," she observed, smiling: "I meant upon rabbits, cats, and dogs—and not upon human beings. God forbid!"

"Ah! now I am relieved," said her husband, breathing freely once again. "The experiment must be an interesting one—*as an experiment*, mind; and I should like to see it tried."

"I can gratify you at any time," returned Julia; "for I have the receipts of both poison and antidote about me at this very moment."

"You have!" cried Page. "What the deuce made you get possession of them?"

"My father was looking over his pocket-book the other day," was the answer; "and he let a paper fall upon the floor. He did not notice the circumstance—and I afterwards picked it up. It contained the two receipts I speak of—together with another of quite a different character;—and, thinking it just as well that such a document should not be left in the old man's possession, I sewed it inside the lining of my stays. He did not miss it, to my knowledge, up to the hour of his death."

"And what is the other receipt which you allude to as being of a different nature from the poison and the antidote?" asked Page.

"It is more curious and ingenious than positively bad," replied Julia; "although it assists evil-designing persons to carry on a safe correspondence by means of letters. In fact, it consists of two distinct preparations. One is an invisible ink—the other is the chemical wash which must be rubbed over the sheet of paper to render the writing visible."

"Whew!" ejaculated Page, with a whistling sound. "Now I begin to see a clue to something which this pocket-book contains!"

"Very likely," observed Julia.

"But go on, my dear," added her husband. "We will go over the contents of the pocket-book together presently."

"I have little more to tell you," resumed Mrs. Page. "You see that the invisible ink and the chemical wash are very ingenious preparations. Suppose, for instance, that you wanted to correspond on secret matters with some accomplice at a distant place; and you were desirous of making sure that your letters should not be read. You would write with the invisible ink, and the sheet of paper would appear an entire blank. In this way it would go through the post, the address being alone written in proper ink. Well, your friend receives it—washes it over with the chemical preparation—and when it has been dried before the fire, all the writing appears as plain as possible. But this is not all. Suppose that, having read the

letter, your friend wishes to keep it by him for future reference. He can restore it to its blank state by dipping it in water—a simple process which causes all the writing to disappear once more. The chemical preparation will however bring forth that writing again, when required; and this may be done for three or four times without destroying the document."

"Wonderful!—wonderful!" ejaculated the commercial traveller. "And you say that you are in possession of these receipts as well as those for the terrible poison and its counteractive?"

"Yes: you may have them whenever you will," answered Julia.

"We will make use of the chemical preparation to restore the writing this very day, my dear," said Page. "And now tell me—was your father intimately leagued with that Magsman?"

"Much more than I liked," responded the young woman. "Don't you remember that when we were examining the cellar together the night before last, I told you that I hated the man Briggs and all his crew? I don't pretend to be very particular in some matters: but I detest the miscreants that deal in murder by poison or violent means, as I am sure those fellows have long done."

"Well—well," interrupted Page; "you are now removed from their society, at all events. Let us next turn our attention to the papers contained in this pocket-book. Of course the Hannah Lightfoot whose hair is enclosed in one of these papers, and whose Christian name or initials are appended to the letters, was your father's sister—consequently your aunt?"

"She was," answered Julia. "But I never saw her: she died of a broken-heart when I was a mere child."

"Now, do you think she was really married to the present King—or not?" inquired Page.

"It is impossible to say. I used to ask my father sometimes—but he always evaded the question. For my part, I should imagine that she was: for I believe that her principles were most excellent and her virtue beyond all question. Besides," added Julia, "the contents of that pocket-book appear to prove that she was a wife, and not a mistress."

"Such is my opinion," observed Page. "But how was it that your father, who was evidently such a griping and avaricious man, did not think of making money by these papers?" demanded the commercial traveller.

"I know that he often thought of doing so," was the reply: "but I have heard him say, when he was in conversation with the Magsman upon the subject, that the letters proved nothing. They were restored to my aunt, it appears, when all connexion was broken off between her and the present King—then Prince of Wales. But one-half of a certain document in my aunt's possession had unfortunately been lost by her—and that was the only paper which really might have been made good use of, had it fallen in its entire state into my father's hands."

"Then your father never had that document in an entire state?" said Page.

"Never," was the reply. "But I will tell you how that was—for I have often heard the old man speaking about it. It appears that when my aunt's connexion with George III—then Prince of Wales—ceased, she retired into the strictest seclusion, living upon a small pension allowed her through the agency of a certain Lady Stamford. My father used to visit her occasionally, and urged her to assist in extorting money from her former lover, or husband—whichever he might have been—and who had now become King. But my aunt always refused with indignation to lend herself to such a proceeding. This caused serious quarrels between them—and at last my aunt removed to some place where he could not find her out. A long, long time elapsed; and it was just before my aunt's death occurred about sixteen years ago, that she again changed her residence, having been traced out by my father. She now took a lodging at Aylesbury, in the house of a young and new-married couple named Warren."

"What! the Magsman?" ejaculated Page.

"You shall hear. These Warrens were poor: but my aunt believed them to be honest. Mrs. Warren, who was then about four-and-twenty, was a woman of remarkable beauty and superior education: but having disgraced herself, she was discarded by her family and was glad to marry a junior clerk in Martin's bank at Aylesbury."

"Martin's bank!" exclaimed Page. "Why, all these matters begin to connect themselves together like so many different links of the same chain. But go on."

"Well—one day, when my aunt Hannah Lightfoot was very ill, she had been examining the contents of a pocket-book with great attention, and had wept over them,—Mrs. Warren being present at the time. It appears that a piece of paper dropped upon the floor, as my aunt was replacing the documents; and she did not notice it. Mrs. Warren picked it up stealthily—secreted it—and afterwards showed it to her husband. It was a portion of a certificate or memorandum, and bore the signature of the present King when he was Prince of Wales. The Warrens kept it with the determination of securing the other half and obtaining money by it from the Government. But at this crisis, my father again discovered his sister's abode, and made his appearance at the house. His presence caused her death; and he took possession of all her little property, the pocket-book included."

"Perhaps he tried the effect of some of his poisons on the unfortunate lady!" observed the commercial traveller, looking at his wife significantly—as if he had made a very shrewd guess.

"Heaven only knows!" exclaimed Julia. "But I must confess that I have often had my suspicions on that point," she observed, shaking her head ominously.

"Well, go on. I suppose," continued Page, "that your father and the Warrens put their wits together to see what they could do with the papers."

"No such thing!" returned Julia. "The Warrens kept their own secret relative to the half of the document which they had in their possession; and my father walked off with the pocket-book, leaving those people to conduct his sister's funeral. Remember, all this occurred sixteen years ago—just about the time that my mother died. Well, time slipped away—and five or six years back my father and I went to live in that court where he died the other day and you found me. Three years ago he fell in with the Magsman, who about that period took the house next door for his own purposes. My

father's name being Lightfoot instantly struck the Magsman with a certain suspicion; and on conversing together they found that they had met before, in past times. For this Magsman was none other than Joseph Warren, formerly a clerk in Martin's bank at Aylesbury. Then Warren told my father about the half of the document which his wife had discovered; and my father was most anxious to learn what had become of it. Warren informed him that soon after the funeral of Hannah Lightfoot had taken place, he wrote to the Home Secretary, enclosing a copy of the fragment of the paper and offering to sell it for a handsome sum of money The negotiation was long and tedious: but at the end of several months a bargain was struck; and Mrs. Warren was sent by her husband to London to receive the money and give up the document. It however appears that she never returned to Aylesbury; and from that moment Warren lost all clue to her. He repaired to London in search of her: all was in vain—and what seemed more extraordinary was the fact that she had not been to the Home Office at all. Her husband therefore concluded that she had met her death either by accident or foul means; and we may suppose that he was not a little vexed at this failure of his grand hopes of enriching himself. He remained in London, and soon took to those ways which we now find him pursuing."

"And how came you to learn all these latter particulars?" asked Page, greatly interested in the singular narrative.

"Because the first interview between my father and the Magsman took place in my presence," was the answer; "and, although I was only sixteen at the time, I was rather sharp for my age and listened to everything I heard."

"We must suppose, from all the facts that are known to us," continued Page, "that the other and most important half of the certificate is irretrievably lost—perhaps destroyed altogether."

"Such was my father's impression after he had heard all that the Magsman told him when they met in the way I have just related: but soon afterwards," continued Julia, "something happened to make him alter his opinion on that head: and there is every reason to believe that the other half of the paper is still in existence somewhere."

"Indeed!" cried Page "But what is this new incident to which you refer?"

"I will tell you," said the young woman. "Many years ago, it seems, the Magsman was acquainted with Jack Rann, the celebrated highwayman, who at that time had a beautiful mistress called Letitia Fluke. This female has since married a rich baronet; and her present name is Lade. About six months ago the Magsman met Lady Letitia, and instantly recognised her, although she was dressed in male attire: for it appears that she is a dashing horsewoman and frequently goes about dressed up as a man. I suppose that she and the Magsman must have conversed together in a confidential way: for in the course of their interview something that he dropped induced the lady to ask farther questions—and this led to other proceedings. For, a few days afterwards, she paid my father a visit, accompanied by a sporting gentleman whom she called Tim Meagles; and shortly afterwards the Magsman arrived. I was turned out of the room: but I listened at the door—and I heard this Meagles make certain proposals to my father for the surrender of the remaining half of the document which he held in his possession."

"Stop!" ejaculated Page, a thought striking him: and, turning over the contents of the pocket-book, he produced the short note written in a neat female hand, and the contents of which were as follow:—

"*July* 7, 1794.

"The next post will bring you a long letter, full of the necessary explanations. Rub it over with the chemical preparation. I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening.

"L. L."

"This is no doubt from the lady you speak of!" exclaimed Page, after hastily glancing over the note. "L. L. stands for *Letitia Lade*—and T. M. means *Timothy Meagles*. It is as clear as daylight!"

"I never saw that letter before," observed Julia. "To whom is it addressed?"

"To nobody. It doubtless was enclosed in an envelope, which was thrown away."

"Well, I should think it was written to the Magsman," observed Julia, after a few moments' reflection: "because she would scarcely tell my father to use the chemical preparation for the letter that was to follow—as he was sure to do so on receiving a blank sheet of paper. Besides, I do not remember that either she or Meagles ever paid my father a second visit—and I know that on the occasion when they were all closetted together, as I was just now telling you, the interview concluded in a manner which put an end to all negotiation."

"How was that?" inquired Page.

"Why, when Meagles made his proposals for the half of the certificate," returned Julia, "my father instantly exclaimed, *Then the other half is in existence; and you know where it is! Perhaps it is even in your possession!*"—Meagles vowed complete ignorance, and observed that he was a mere agent in the business. Thereupon my father declared that he would only treat with a principal: and he accused the Magsman of knowing more about the affair than he chose to confess. Warren protested against this charge: a quarrel ensued—and Meagles took his departure with Lady Letitia, no arrangement having been made."

"I wonder that the Magsman never tried to rob your father of his papers," observed Page.

'God bless you! he did within a week after this business," exclaimed Julia: "but the old man concealed the pocket-book so effectually, that the search was instituted in vain. The Magsman, Briggs, and a fellow called the Big Beggarman——"

"I know him—the scoundrel!" cried Page. "Upon my word, I am quite at home with all these characters. But go on."

"Well—the three villains got into the house at night—bound my father neck and heels with strong cords—and held a pistol to my head while they ransacked the place: but not a trace of the pocket-book could they find. I suppose the old man used to bury it in the cellar. However, they went away sadly disappointed; and the next morning the Magsman came and made his peace with my father; for I imagine that they were too useful to each other and too deeply mixed up in certain transactions to remain bad friends."

"No doubt of it!" observed Page. "And now that I bethink me again," he continued, producing a paper from the pocket-book, "here is a blank

"Well—I will do so now, my charmer," returned Meagles; "and the narrative will afford you a little farther insight with respect to the character of our friend George. It will moreover prove that we are fully justified in obtaining possession of papers for the purpose of overawing *him*, inasmuch as he has not hesitated to adopt the same course with a view to coerce his own father."

"What! to menace and threaten the King!" exclaimed Letitia, in astonishment.

"Nothing more nor less," responded Meagles, coolly. "Listen. It was a little more than fifteen years ago, that the Prince—then only eighteen—was one evening walking by himself down Whitehall, when he espied by the lamp-light a beautiful young woman who appeared to be surveying the buildings in that neighbourhood as if she were looking for some particular house or Government Office. He accosted her, and soon got into conversation with the charming stranger. She told him that she had come from Aylesbury on important business, and was anxious to obtain an interview with the Home Secretary as soon as possible. The Prince assured her that it was too late to procure an audience of that functionary; and she finally agreed to accompany him whithersoever he chose to take her. I need scarcely tell you that they passed the night together; and so pleased was the stripling George with his new acquaintance that he was by no means desirous for the amour to terminate there. He accordingly made her certain proposals—offering to maintain her as his mistress, and revealing who he was. The young woman was overjoyed at having captivated the Prince; and, in the fullness of her delight, she told him the object of her journey to London. In fact, this was none other than Mrs. Warren, the wife of the fellow who is now known as the Magsman."

"I remember well that when I first knew Warren fourteen or fifteen years since," said Lady Letitia, "he told me and Rann how he had come up to London to look for his wife; and he also acquainted us at the same time with the object of her journey. Therefore, when I met Warren again six or seven months ago, one of the first questions I put to him was whether he had ever succeeded in finding his wife; and, after replying in the negative, he observed it was vexatious that the one half of the certificate had disappeared with her, because accident had thrown him in the way of the late Hannah Lightfoot's brother, in whose possession the other half existed. I subsequently mentioned this fact to you, Tim—if you remember: and then you told me for the first time that you had seen in the hands of the Prince the fragment which Mrs. Warren had originally brought with her to London."

"I recollect," said Meagles: "and it was fortunate that the Magsman had told you where he might be found in case his services were ever needed."

"Not particularly fortunate either," returned the Amazon: "for when you and I visited old Lightfoot, according to a previous arrangement with Warren, the crabbed old fellow would not so much as show us his half of the document—much less part with it on any consideration."

"He fancied he should get more by treating with the principal," observed Meagles. "But now that we have resolved to renew the negotiations, and on our own account too, we will be more liberal in our offers than the means of the Prince permitted us to be six or seven months ago. You can obtain three or four thousand pounds from Sir John—can't you, my beauty?"

"Leave me to manage *that*, Tim," replied the Amazon. "And now finish your story about Mrs. Warren."

"Oh! I had completely lost sight of that," exclaimed Meagles. "Well—I was saying that the Prince made proposals to Mrs. Warren, and that she acquainted him with the object of her journey to London. He induced her to give up the fragment of the certificate to him; and he provided splendidly for her: but I never could learn from him what became of her, nor how long their connexion lasted. All I know is that she certainly did not go back to her husband; and perhaps she was very glad to be separated from a fellow who, to judge by his present appearance and manners, was likely enough to have been coarse and brutal fifteen or sixteen years ago."

"He was never a polished diamond," remarked Lady Letitia. "But poor Rann made him useful during the few months that their acquaintance lasted; and afterwards I totally lost sight of the fellow until I met him last July."

"To return to what we were talking about," resumed Meagles, "I must inform you that the Prince had the most selfish motives in getting possession of the fragment of the certificate signed by his father, instead of letting the Home Secretary buy it up. For George the Third had already experienced good reason to complain of his eldest son's extravagances; and the Prince thought that it would be as well to hold in his hand the means of coercing his father at pleasure. Accordingly, more than once has he threatened His Majesty to enclose the paper to the Queen, unless his demands were satisfied; and as the King stands in awful dread of his royal wife, the prudish and snuff-taking Charlotte, this menace has usually had the desired effect. But the next time that the Prince contemplates using the mysterious fragment, he will search for it in vain," added Meagles, with a laugh of satisfaction. "In fact, I have succeeded in getting the King—the Prince—and Mrs. Fitzherbert completely into my power."

"Mrs. Fitzherbert!" exclaimed Lady Letitia. "I do not see how she is precisely in your power, Tim. It is true that you have ascertained the real nature of her connexion with the Prince: but perhaps she would thank you for proclaiming it, rather than feel herself aggrieved."

"Ah! this is another secret of mine, you harum-scarum good-for-nothing," said Meagles, with a sly look. "But I do not intend to make any mystery of it towards you, Letitia," he added almost immediately,—"now that we have determined to pull together in the same boat. The fact is that the influx of these foreign refugees has proved of some service; for on the one hand it has thrown upon our shores a Marquis of Saint Croix to lend a good round sum to the Prince of Wales—and on the other hand it has sent amongst us a Marquis of Bellois to give certain curious information to Mr. Timothy Meagles."

"What do you mean?" inquired the Amazon, animated with the most lively curiosity.

"I mean that eight years ago Mrs. Fitzherbert visited France," replied Meagles; "and that at Plombiers she became acquainted with a nobleman of handsome appearance and elegant manners: I mean also that she fell deeply in love with him, and that she accompanied him to Paris, where in

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due time a child was born—the issue of this amour. The nobleman to whom I allude was the Marquis of Bellois!"

"And is the Prince ignorant of this chapter in the life of Mrs. Fitzherbert?" asked Lady Letitia.

"He has not the remotest suspicion of it," returned Meagles. "It was in consequence of a quarrel which took place between them at the time, that Mrs. Fitzherbert withdrew to France; and her absence lasted altogether eighteen months. During that interval her amour with the Marquis de Bellois took place: but, fortunately for her, the offspring of the connexion was born dead. Scarcely had she recovered from her confinement, when letters from the Prince reached her imploring that she would return to England. She assented—and the French nobleman was abandoned by his beautiful mistress. Nearly seven years have elapsed since Mrs. Fitzherbert thus came back to the Prince; and now the Marquis has himself arrived in London. He is a gambler—a debauchee—an unprincipled profligate; and he is in possession of letters proving his connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert. I have seen and read them: and the Marquis intends to convert them into a means of replenishing a purse which extravagance has emptied. Those papers, Letitia," added Meagles emphatically, "you and I must purchase. With a thousand pounds I will undertake to secure them."

"And I will guarantee to furnish you with the requisite amount in the course of the week, Tim," answered the Amazon. "At the same time I do not foresee any particular advantage in possessing weapons which, in all probability, you will never have to use against Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"Let us provide our bow with as many strings as possible, my dear Letitia," observed Meagles. "Who can tell what may happen? The King may die soon—and our friend George, when once seated on the throne, may choose to cast the Royal

Marriage Act to the winds and proclaim Mrs. Fitzherbert his wife and his Queen. In such a case, would it be of no avail to us that the honour of the lady exists in our keeping? But, under any circumstances, when we have obtained as much as we can get from the Prince, we shall then demand *more* through the influence and agency of Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"You are right, Tim," said the Amazon: "we will secure the possession of the Marquis of Bellois' papers. And now, when are we to renew our negotiations with Joseph Warren, the redoubtable Magsman?"

"You and I will pay that worthy a visit this very evening, my beauty," answered Meagles. "Only fancy what a glorious thing it would be for us if we should succeed in obtaining the other half of the certificate, and if, when put together, the entire document proved that the present King was really married to Hannah Lightfoot! Why—not only would the honour of the Sovereign be completely in our hands—but likewise the validity of his alliance with the Queen and the legitimacy of all his children."

"To be sure!" ejaculated the huntress. "But I am afraid, from certain expressions—mangled and fragmentary though they be—in the moiety of the document which we now possess, that no real marriage ever took place."

"The whole tenour of that matter, so far as we can understand it," said Meagles, "admits of two interpretations,—one for, and the other against a belief in such a marriage. It is impossible to decide between them until we can peruse the document as a whole; and this evening we will endeavour to lay a train for the purchase of the fragment in old Lightfoot's possession," added Tim; for the old man's death was unknown to him and the Amazon.

"I dare say we shall succeed," observed the latter, rising from her seat. "We shall work with more energy now that it is for ourselves, than we did when the Prince commissioned you to negotiate privately in his behalf. But it is now mid-day, Tim—and the weather is clearing up. I must hasten home—change my Amazonian garb for a silk gown, gipsy-bonnet, and warm furs—and appear in a dress which, as the common phrase goes, is *suitable to my sex*," she added, laughing.

"And pray whom are you bent upon captivating to-day?" demanded Tim, bestowing upon the splendid creature a caress which she received in a manner indicating that, however profligate she might be, and however lavish of her favours she notoriously was, she nevertheless entertained something like a sincere affection for Meagles.

"So far from having any such idea as you impute to me, Tim," she said, in answer to the question which he had jocularly put to her, "I mean to play the amiable towards old Sir John, and take him out for an airing in the carriage. He will be so delighted that nothing I may ask will be refused; and I shall pave the way to obtain the few thousands that you and I are likely to require for our purposes in the course of the week. Adieu for the present, my dear Tim: I shall call for you at about eight this evening—and we will then proceed together to the classic region of Horsydown."

"Adieu, my charmer," returned Meagles, pressing his lips to her rich red mouth; and the Amazon took her departure from the lodgings of her paramour.

We cannot close this chapter without directing the attention of the reader to the fact that Mr. Meagles had maintained towards Lady Letitia Lade the same secrecy and silence relative to the orphan boys which he had observed on the preceding evening with the Prince of Wales.

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. PAGE AND HIS WIFE.

We now go back to Mr. Page and his wife, whom we shall find proceeding arm-in-arm from the Borough towards old London Bridge.

The commercial traveller, flattering himself that he was a man worth six thousand pounds in ready money and possessing papers calculated to produce as much again, walked with his head erect and an air of such assurance that one would have thought the entire metropolis belonged to him. In this respect he was well matched by Julia, who, fancying that her gaudy bonnet and her flaunting shawl were sufficient to render her "quite the lady," marched along with an assumption of vulgar pride which made her seem as if she fancied the street was not half wide enough for her. The little boys stared at the singular-looking couple—sober-minded people experienced a sentiment of pity for their vanity—and when the poor shivering beggars touched their hats or curtsied, as the case of suit might be, Page held his head up higher still; for it struck him that he was all of a sudden very much respected.

In this manner they crossed the bridge, and proceeded straight to Wood Street, where they entered the warehouse of Messrs. Hodson and Morley.

The senior partner happened to be there at the moment, superintending the unpacking of some bales of goods which had just arrived; and, on hearing the door open, he raised his eyes and beheld the commercial traveller with a bold-looking woman hanging to his arm.

Mr. Hodson was astonished; and, putting on his spectacles, he indulged in another long stare at the newly-married couple. Yes—it was really Page,—Page with his hat cocked jauntily on one side of his head, and with such a smirking familiarity expressed alike in his countenance and manner, that the sedate merchant knew not whether to consider him drunk or demented. But how different from the Mr. Page who used to take off his beaver the instant he crossed the threshold, and who was wont to glide noiselessly through the warehouse direct into the private office as if he were treading upon eggs! And then that woman, too—with the flaunting dress of a vulgar upstart and the bold looks of a courtezan! What could it all mean? Mr. Hodson knew not: he was bewildered—and, turning towards the porter who stood gazing open-mouthed upon the pair, he said in a hollow tone, "Ask Mr Morley to step this way."

"I hope I don't intrude, Hodson," exclaimed Page, caressing his chin and speaking in a sort of blandly patronising tone: "but I thought that as I was in the neighbourhood I might just as well drop in to ask you how you got on, and likewise to tell you, my boy, to look out for another country-traveller—as I've cut the thing dead. D'ye hear, Hodson?"

The merchant had indeed heard: but he could scarcely believe his ears. Was it possible that Page had called him "Hodson,"—plain and simple "Hodson,"—aye, and twice too? He was aghast with surprise; and he began to wonder whether the world had suddenly turned upside down, when Mr. Morley came hurrying forth from the counting-house.

"Ah! Page—is that you?" cried the junior partner, who was a short, thin, active little man. "Well—I'm glad to see you're alive and hearty, after all you've undergone. But who is this young woman?" he demanded, his eyes settling suspiciously upon Julia.

"This *lady*, sir," said Mr. Page pompously, "is my wife. And I am proud and happy to inform you, friend Morley," he added, unbending a little, "that she has brought me a fortune of twenty thousand pounds."

As he uttered these words, he pressed Julia's arm slightly with his own, in order to intimate that she need not contradict the little lie which his vanity prompted him to tell respecting the amount of her dowry.

"Twenty thousand pounds!" ejaculated Hodson and Morley as if it were in the same breath.

"Not a farthing more or less, I can assure you," said Mr. Page, tapping his cane impressively upon the floor.

"Well—I am delighted to hear it, my dear friend," exclaimed Hodson, who worshipped Mammon far more devoutly than he did either Royalty or Aristocracy.

"And so am I, Page—quite rejoiced," added Morley, whose deity was also Money.

And then the two partners shook their late traveller warmly by both hands; and, having done this, they offered their congratulations to Mrs. Page, hoping that they should have the pleasure of introducing her very shortly to Mrs. Hodson and Mrs. Morley. It was indeed wonderful to behold the effect which the magic words "twenty thousand pounds" had produced upon the stiff and starch senior partner, and the active, bustling, business-like junior. Julia no longer appeared in their eyes to have the boldness of a courtezan: in their minds her demeanour had suddenly become associated with debentures—her character with cash—her features with funds—and her entire countenance with consols;—and they were seized with anxiety that their wives should make her acquaintance. Even when she tossed her head, gave herself airs, and said something about calling another day, they overwhelmed her with politeness; and there was a great deal more shaking of hands ere Mr. Page and his bride took their leave on this occasion.

Having thus shown themselves off in Wood Street, they repaired to St. Paul's Churchyard where Mr. Page procured some drug at a chemist's shop. Thence they proceeded into Fleet Street, where he bought another drug at another shop; and in the Strand he made his third purchase.

"You see, Julia," he observed, as they walked along, "that I exercise a sound discretion in thus obtaining the things at different places. There are three ingredients in the chemical preparation for the wash to put upon the blank sheet of paper; and if I purchased them all at the same shop, the chemist would begin to mix and compound the moment our backs were turned, in order to discover for what purpose we wanted such scarce and expensive articles."

"God bless your soul, Henry," exclaimed his wife, "you are only acting with a prudence that is quite natural. My father always did the same: and therefore I don't see anything to be so particularly proud of."

"Well—well, my dear," returned Page: "at all events you perceive that I adopt the same precautions as your deceased father—and he was a very shrewd man."

"Just so," said Julia; and, to use a parliamentary phrase, the subject then dropped.

Having completed their chemical purchases, and likewise a little "shopping" for the behoof of Mrs. Page, the worthy couple entered a tavern, where a private room and a good dinner were immediately ordered. They did ample justice to the repast; and when it was over, a hackney-coach conveyed them back to the Borough of Southwark.

It was dusk when they reached their lodgings; and as soon as the candles were lighted and the curtains were drawn in the parlour, they seated themselves by the cheerful fire and began to compound the chemical wash in accordance with the receipt. This employment occupied nearly half-an-hour; and when the preparation was made, the pocket-book was once more produced. The blank sheet of paper already so often referred to, was then spread out upon the table; and by the assistance of a large camel's-hair brush, the wash was carefully laid on. With feelings of acute suspense did Page now hold the paper in front of the fire; and as the moisture slowly exhaled, he observed with infinite satisfaction that lines of writing gradually appeared upon the surface of the sheet.

"By Jove! it is just as you described!" he exclaimed, glancing triumphantly towards Julia. "The receipt fulfils all you have told me. Look—the contents of the letter are standing out as it were from amidst the misty vapour. And 'tis just the same neat female handwriting as that in the little note signed L. L. Yes—this is the letter which was to follow by the next post—there's not a doubt of it! We're on the point of penetrating into some strange mysteries, I'll warrant! Hollos! I do believe that the document contains a copy of the other half of the certificate."

"To be sure it does!" said Julia, bending down so as to obtain a nearer view of the letter as her husband held it before the fire. "There's a short passage running down the right hand of the page—and I can read the name of *Hannah Lightfoot* in it! Come—that will do—it is dry enough now. Let us examine it at once."

"We will," returned Page: "I am even more impatient than you are. Because, if the certificate should prove that your aunt was really married to the present King, our fortunes are made. And even if it should be otherwise, we are in possession of papers which the Government will cheerfully buy up."

"While you are talking thus, the letter will singe," said Julia, somewhat impatiently. "Let us see what it contains, and debate upon it afterwards."

"We will, my dear," answered Mr. Page: then placing the document before him upon the table, he read it aloud in slow and measured terms:—

"*July* 7, 1794. *Evening*, 6 o'clock.

"My little note of this morning has prepared you for the receipt of this; and you must now judge whether it is worth while for you to compel old Lightfoot by fear

means to surrender up his half of the paper, since he refuses to do so by fair means. T. M. has procured a copy of the half which is in the possession of the individual who employs *him* in the business: and thus it runs:—

> may concern, and know ye, all
> the undersigned, George Prince of
> cknowledge that I do now take
> wife in the sight of an all-seeing
> ewise undersigned Miss Hannah
> nderly and devotedly love with
> ul, and who fully as sincerely,
> me in return, with all her true
> w likewise, all persons whom
> nly and sacredly bind and pledge
> ght of an all-seeing heaven, that
> shall so dispose the heart of my
> as to grant his royal and paternal
> nsion to the proper celebration
> signed Miss Hannah Lightfoot,—
> at refusal which so very sorely
> sion to the royal throne of
> se (which God long prevent!)
> lay, make her my wife and Queen:
> dy consider ourselves to be
> tly and severally set our hands
> sence of a competent witness,
> ousand seven hundred and fifty-seven.
>
> GEORGE P.
> HANNAH LIGHTFOOT.

Such is the copy of the fragment in the possession of the person who employs T. M. in the matter: but who that person is, you must not expect to learn. Indeed, it can have nothing to do with the share which *you* are required to take in the matter. You saw the other day that Lightfoot was obstinate: it is therefore useless for T. M. and me to negotiate with him any more. But you told me when I saw you last night that you had many and cogent reasons for not coming to a rupture with the old man. Surely the thousand guineas T. M. offers you through me—and with the chance of two thousand—will amply remunerate you for any loss you may sustain in consequence of a quarrel with Lightfoot. Besides, if—as you hinted—he and you are so useful to each other and so mixed up in several matters, he will forgive you in the long run for temporarily turning against him.

"The preceding is a faithful copy of the fragment in the possession of T. M's. principal. You, who have seen the half in Lightfoot's hands, can now judge of the value of the document as a whole. This we must leave to you: because, inasmuch as the obstinate old fellow would not even allow me and T. M. a sight of *his* moiety, we are utterly unable to form an opinion of the tenour of the paper when read and viewed in its complete state. But now observe:—if the document, when read as a whole, confesses marriage—then it is of first-rate importance, and the reward given to you for what we require of you, shall be two thousand guineas. But if the document should be found to contain only a promise of marriage, the sum shall be one thousand guineas, as originally proposed by T. M. Thus stands the matter. If we hear no more from you, we shall conclude that you decline proceeding farther in it: if the contrary be the case, you can write to me at my own house. In this latter alternative, you will do well to use the invisible ink: for although Sir J. would never dream of opening any correspondence addressed to me, it is as well to guard against impertinent curiosity on the part of menials. I told you in my note of this morning that I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening: I hope to hear from you by that time.

"L. L."

"Now, then, all mystery is cleared up in respect to the certificate," exclaimed Page, when he had brought the perusal of this letter to an end; "and it does *not* prove a marriage. On the contrary, it shows that the present King and your aunt were never united by any legal ceremony—at least up to the period when that paper was signed."

"Let us put our original half against the copy of the other one," said Julia, "and see how the whole reads."

"We will," returned Page: and, having followed his wife's suggestion, he found that the memorandum or certificate ran in the ensuing terms:—

> "TAKE notice, all ye whom it may concern, and know ye, all men, by these presents, that I the undersigned, George Prince of Wales, do hereby declare and acknowledge that I do now take and solemnly consider to be my wife in the sight of an all-seeing heaven and before God, the likewise undersigned Miss Hannah Lightfoot, whom I sincerely, tenderly and devotedly love with all my heart and with all my soul, and who fully as sincerely, tenderly, and devotedly loveth me in return, with all her true heart and all her soul: and know likewise, all persons whom it may concern, that I do solemnly and sacredly bind and pledge myself, before God and in the sight of an all-seeing heaven, that when the will of the Almighty shall so dispose the heart of my august and well-beloved father as to grant his royal and paternal assent and most gracious permission to the proper celebration of my marriage with the undersigned Miss Hannah Lightfoot,—or, in case of perseverance in that refusal which so very sorely grieves me,—then, on my accession to the royal throne of these realms, on my sire's demise (which God long prevent) I declare that I will, without delay, make her my wife and Queen—and in token that we do already consider ourselves to be husband and wife, we have jointly and severally set our hands to this document, in the presence of a competent witness, this third day of April, One Thousand seven hundred and fifty seven.
>
> "Witness,
> "WILLIAM STAMFORD, Bart.
>
> GEORGE P.
> HANNAH LIGHTFOOT."

"Well," remarked Page, as soon as he had read aloud this singular document, "it is no wonder that the King is sometimes crazy. A pretty load of perjury he has got upon his conscience. The whole country would raise its voice in execration of such a man, were this document made public. But that is not our game. We care nothing about the morality of the thing: all we want is to make money.'

"And what do you propose to do?" inquired Julia.

"There are two distinct lines of action open to us," answered Page, after a few minutes' deep cogitation. "One is to sell our half of the certificate to that Mr. Meagles of whom you spoke this morning: the other is to try and get the remaining half into our possession, and then dispose of the

complete document to the Government. You see that the fragment which we have not got is the most important, because it contains the signatures of the present King and your late aunt."

"But how can we obtain that half?" demanded Julia.

"There is one way—and only one way that I can see," responded Page. "I must call upon Meagles and propose to give him his own price for procuring me the fragment which his principal or employer, whoever he may be, possesses. It would be worth while to venture three or four thousand guineas in such a bargain. We should make ten thousand by it."

"And where are you to get three or four thousand guineas from?" said the young woman, putting the query with some degree of hesitation, amounting even to uneasiness—as if she felt that it was now necessary to reveal something of a disagreeable nature, and that it became impossible to delay the confession.

"Where are we to get such a sum from?" cried her husband, surveying her with astonishment. "Why—haven't we six thousand golden guineas safe in that cupboard?"

"But you must not—you cannot—you dare not pass away many of those coins at the same time," said Julia, speaking with an emphasis which was unusual on her part.

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded Page, with increasing wonderment. "*You* have come by the money honestly, at all events: it is yours by inheritance—and you are not supposed to have any idea of the illegitimate means whereby your father thus enriched himself."

"Ah! I have already told you that my father was a terrible man," observed Julia, with a strange mysteriousness in her tone and aspect; "and he was acquainted with a number of marvellous secrets."

"So much the better for us!" exclaimed her husband. "The gold which those secrets produced him, has fallen into our hands."

"But do you not know what my father originally was?" asked Julia.

"A chemist, I should imagine—or something of that sort."

"Not at all. He was one of the principal coiners in the Royal Mint; and he lost his situation in consequence of being suspected of secreting two or three dies or moulds in which certain pieces of money were cast."

As Julia was giving utterance to these words in a tone of peculiar significancy, a horrible idea stole into the mind of her husband; and, suddenly remembering that letter in the pocket-book which referred to the supply of spurious coin to the bankers at Aylesbury, the sickening suspicion now excited was in a few moments changed into a crushing conviction.

A deadly pallor came over his countenance; and sinking back in his chair, he murmured in a low and hoarse voice, "Give me a drop of brandy, Julia—or I shall faint!"

The young woman hastened to comply with this request; and Page, having drained the wine-glass which she filled with the ardent spirit, began slowly to recover from the consternation that had fallen upon him.

"I had better know the worst at once, Julia," he said, regarding her with haggard eyes. "The contents of those six bags——"

"Are all spurious," she hastened to reply: "there's no use in mincing the matter—and now you've learnt the real truth."

"But you should have told me—you should not have misled me——" began Page, his bitter disappointment now changing into fury.

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed Julia, her tone, countenance, and manner all suddenly indicating that she could be a very demoness when roused, difficult though it were to excite her: "you are accusing me wrongfully—and I'll smash your head to pieces with that poker if you give me any more of your nonsense. You sought me out—I did not seek you: you had already made up your mind that my father was a rich miser—and at first I was going to undeceive you;—but your intentions towards myself became apparent—and I held my tongue, suffering you to fancy whatever you chose. Now, then, are we not equal? You married me only because you thought I was wealthy—I married you because I wanted a respectable position."

While she was thus speaking, Julia's eyes shot forth living fires—her white teeth gleamed between the lips which the habit of dram-drinking had rendered of an unnatural red—and her cheeks, which dissipation had robbed of the hues of health, became flushed with the purple dye of rage.

"Come, Julia dear—come—I didn't mean to vex you—I—I assure you I did not," stammered Page, absolutely frightened by the fiendish countenance that thus glared so menacingly upon him. "I was wrong—I know that I was—I——I beg your pardon, Julia," he added humbly.

"Well—you can't do more than that," said the young woman, instantly becoming pacified: and by the aid of a dram she appeared to relieve her feelings altogether. "The only thing you can do, is to make the best of a bad bargain—if you still think it is one. Follow the counsel which my father intended for me in the little scrap of paper scrawled over with a pencil: that is—use the coin wisely, and we shall prosper;—use it rashly, and we shall be ruined."

"By Jove! it is my opinion that we had better not use it at all," exclaimed the ex-traveller.

"That be hanged!" responded Julia. "You have already passed away three or four pieces in to-day's purchases; and you saw that on each occasion, when the shopkeepers rang the money on their counters, they were perfectly satisfied with it."

"True!" observed Page — but not without a shudder at the idea of having passed away no less than four spurious guineas in the course of the day.

"You need have no fear of detection, if you only act with caution," resumed Julia, who possessed no ordinary amount of common sense and sterling judgment. "My father was as skilful in coining base money as he was in his chemical experiments. He might have been immensely rich, if he wasn't so timid. The sordid manner in which he lived was a mere blind, to avert suspicion: and there were times when he enjoyed himself with many luxuries, I can tell you. But it was on account of me chiefly that he would not launch out into a decent way of life. He thought that I was naturally extravagant; and that if I was allowed the use of as much of that spurious money as I

wanted, I should soon be bringing the Bow Street runners about him. The older he got, the more frightened he grew. But he needn't have entertained such fears for me. I have seen too much to act with anything like a flagrant imprudence. And therefore, I tell you again that we may use this money, if we do it cautiously."

"It would really be a sin to forego such a chance," said Page, in a musing manner: "especially after having made a successful beginning with the four pieces that we changed to-day. Besides, after all the vapouring and boasting at Hodson and Morley's, it would be wretched indeed to find ourselves taken down so many pegs. The coin is certainly admirable," he observed, balancing one of the spurious guineas on the tip of his fore-finger.

"Admirable!" repeated Julia: "I am very sure that not even an officer of the Mint himself could detect it, unless he cut it in two. The weight is the same—there's a thin coating of gold all over—and it is cast in one of the Mint dies. My father was turned out of the Society of Friends on account of losing his place at the Mint through being suspected of stealing the moulds. But the authorities could not bring it home to him—and so he escaped punishment."

"And this letter," observed Page, taking from the pocket-book the one that bore the Aylesbury post-mark, and that related to the manner in which the "*goods*," were to be packed and sent,—"this letter, I suppose, referred to some transaction respecting a supply of spurious coin"

"Yes: the Magsman managed the job—and my father coined the money. Three thousand guineas were first despatched to Aylesbury; and a quantity more was ordered. But for some reason which I never heard, this second supply was not sent. I dare say," added Julia, "that it is to this circumstance we are indebted for the possession of the amount in that cupboard."

"Yes—I see by this letter that the bankers intended to have a second remittance of three thousand in six months," said Page. "That would have been on the 17th of last September: but I suppose that they got frightened and revoked the bargain. However, all this does not relate to our own affairs. What we must now do is to endeavour to negotiate with Lady Letitia Lade or Mr. Meagles for the sale of all the papers concerning Hannah Lightfoot's business; and then we will pay a visit to Aylesbury to discover, if possible, a certain Richard Stamford, to whom we can be of great use."

"In what way?" asked Julia.

"He was the gentleman who was confined with me in the cellar underneath that house adjoining your own in the court," returned Page. "But I will tell you all about that baronet and his misfortunes."

Mr. Page then proceeded to narrate to his wife those circumstances in connexion with Sir Richard Stamford which are already known to the reader; and we will now leave the worthy couple to discuss their schemes and their brandy simultaneously—which they did until the clock struck midnight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MR. RAMSEY.

In the meantime scenes of interest were taking place elsewhere; for in the early part of this same evening on which Mr. and Mrs. Page were thus discoursing and enjoying themselves, a tall, handsome, genteel man, enveloped in an ample cloak, landed from a wherry in the immediate neighbourhood of Horsly-down, and, having dismissed the boat, sped rapidly towards the Beggar's Staff.

This individual was about eight-and-twenty years of age. His figure was slight, but admirably proportioned, and by no means deficient in strength: his features were regular and of the Grecian cast;—his complexion was of a clear olive—and it would be impossible to imagine finer eyes or more beautiful teeth on the part of one of the sterner sex. His manners were prepossessing, even to fascination; and there was so refined—nay, even so noble an expression in the *ensemble* of his countenance, that an observer would have unhesitatingly marked him as one eminently calculated to make friends with men and conquests amongst women.

It was about seven o'clock, and the evening was very dark, when this individual landed on the bank of the Thames in the vicinity of Horsly-down. A few minutes rapid walking brought him to the Beggar's Staff, the exterior of which he however surveyed for a few seconds ere he crossed the threshold, as if to assure himself that it was the place which had been described to him. Satisfied with this brief scrutiny, he boldly entered the boosing-ken, and found himself in the midst of a motley company which seemed to be the rakings of all the vilest dregs of a vile neighbourhood.

The Big Beggarman and Carrotty Poll were serving at the bar; and to them did the new-comer address a whispered inquiry for Mr. Joseph Warren.

"Who are you?" demanded the Big Beggarman, eyeing his querist suspiciously.

"My name is Ramsey—Philip Ramsey of Aylesbury," was the immediate response.

"Oh! that's all right!" chimed in Carrotty Poll. "You're not unknown to us, sir," she added, with a sly smile. "Please to walk round;"—and she opened the little gate which led behind the enclosure whence the liquors were dispensed.

Ramsey accordingly entered the diminutive parlour, into which he was followed by the Big Beggarman and Carrotty Poll, a slip-shod waiter of marvellously seedy aspect being left to attend at the bar.

"Pray sit down, sir," said the Beggarman. "As my daughter just now observed, your name's quite familiar to us in this here place. In fact, I was one of the party that managed the spree at Stamford Manor a little while back."

"Ah! you allude to the carrying off of the baronet?" exclaimed Ramsey, unhooking his cloak at the collar. "Then you are doubtless a friend and confidant of Joseph Warren?"

"Better knowed as the Magsman," interjected the landlord of the Beggar's Staff. "Yes—me and that fine feller are staunch pals; and what's his business is my business—and what's my business is his'n."

"Is he to be seen now?" inquired Ramsey, whose countenance wore an expression of deep anxiety.

"It is of the greatest consequence that I should obtain an interview with him as soon as possible."

"He is not here—neither is the Gallows' Widow, which is his blowen," answered the Big Beggarman. "They're gone over into Wapping together, and won't be back again to-night."

"Perdition!" ejaculated Ramsey, in a tone of profound vexation. "Every minute's delay is ruinous!"

"Now don't excite yourself, sir," said Carrotty Poll, in a soothing voice. "We can guess pretty well what it is that's annoying you——"

"Sir Richard Stamford is at liberty!" exclaimed Ramsey, interrupting the young woman impatiently, and striking the table with his clenched fist.

"We know it," observed the Beggarman. "But it is not our fault: he escaped!"

"You are not deceiving me!" cried Ramsey, in a tone of mingled excitement and menace. "How can you prove to me that he did indeed escape—and that neither you nor Joseph Warren, nor any of your associates, connived at his flight!"

"Well—it may be a difficult matter for me to convince you, Mr. Ramsey," returned the villain: "but if you was t'other side of the river at this moment, I could take you to the place where the baronet was confined, and show you the hole that he made in the wall of the cellar."

"I am inclined to believe you—I *do* believe you," said Ramsey. "In fact, if I had really suspected treachery on your part I should not have come hither this evening. Mr. Martin assured me that the utmost reliance was to be placed upon Warren—and he urged me to come to London and see him without delay."

"But how did you learn that the baronet had escaped?" demanded the Beggarman: "for the Magsman only wrote this evening to let you know what had happened—and the letter won't reach Aylesbury till to-morrow morning. He was in hopes of being able to discover Sir Richard again, and take him back to his old quarters: and that's the reason why he didn't send you immediate intelligence of his flight."

"Last evening Mr. Martin received the most positive information that Sir Richard had been seen in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury," said Philip Ramsey: "and, as you may suppose, we were stricken with dismay. In fact, it will be ruin to both Martin and myself—positive ruin," added the young man, with frightful emphasis, "if the baronet is allowed to remain many more hours at large. What is to be done?"

"What would you wish to be done?" asked the Beggarman: "and when you have told us, what will you pay for having it done?"

"You are disposed to assist us—to any extent—to any extreme?" said Ramsey, sinking his voice to a low whisper, which was nevertheless full of meaning: and he cast his looks with kindred significancy upon the villain whom he thus addressed.

"Let us understand each other, Mr. Ramsey," observed the Beggarman. "You gave us a good round sum for carrying off the baronet, and keeping him in limbo: and we fulfilled our bargain as far as we could. We don't hold ourselves answerable for his escape—'cause why, we couldn't help it. We put him in a strong and secure place;—and we knowed that we might rely upon Briggs—that's the chap which kept him in his care—as well as on our ownselves. He wouldn't sign the paper which you and Mr. Martin had drawn up—and that was no fault of our'n neither. But we should have kept him in the cellar till he did: and if he'd held out much longer, we meant to have *starved* him into compliance. Now, then, you perceive that we did our dooty towards you and your partner as well as we was able: and we don't see that anythink fresh or new which you may want us to have done or to do for you, should be executed free gratis for nothink."

"Your observations are perfectly just and your reasoning is correct," said Ramsey. "We are prepared to pay you well for what you must do next."

"In that case, we shan't have no quarrels," remarked the Big Beggarman. "But how go on matters at Aylesbury? We saw by yesterday morning's paper that Lady Stamford was not dead—that she was not even mortally wounded—and that the Coroner's Inquest was held to examine into the cause of the fire, and not the death of the lady, as was at first reported."

"It is all these circumstances which render it so necessary that Sir Richard Stamford should either be got out of the way—or else *put out of the way*," returned Ramsey, again fixing a look of dark and sinister meaning upon the countenance of the Beggarman. "The Coroner's Inquest has decided," he continued, "that the fire was the result of accident—caused by a candle being upset on the supper-table. Thus, the charge of arson no longer presses against Sir Richard Stamford. Then, again, a surgical opinion declares that the wound was inflicted on Lady Stamford with her own hand: and therefore the accusation of murder is likewise quashed."

"But the forgeries, Mr. Ramsey—the forgeries?" exclaimed the Beggarman.

"Perhaps the less we say on that subject, the better," was the reply, delivered in a sombre and gloomy tone. "But it is useless to remain here, idly conversing on these matters," he continued, his tone suddenly becoming impatient and excited "Sir Richard Stamford is in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury—we know where he is concealing himself, while he doubtless waits to ascertain how it may turn out with his wife, ere he takes any actual proceedings——"

"And that lady—is she sensible?—can she speak, so as to give any account of matters that may tell against you, sir?" inquired Carrotty Poll: "for the Magsman informed us that you was pretty intimate with her," she added, with a chuckling laugh.

"She is still hovering between life and death," answered Ramsey, scarcely able to conceal his disgust at the grossness of the woman's manner. "But again I say, do not waste time in asking me questions: assist me, if you will," he continued, addressing himself to the Big Beggarman; —"and if not, I must adopt other means to ensure my safety."

"I have not refused to assist you," replied the burly, red-faced villain doggedly; "but you haven't given me no instructions."

"You are dull at comprehending a hint," said Ramsey, with an impatient uneasiness and restlessness which indicated that he had already planned a terrible deed, but shrank from avowing his thoughts.

"I remember you observed just now that the

baronet must either be *got* out of the way, or *put* out of the way," returned the Beggarman. "Well—it is for you to decide how the thing is to be: and then name the recompense you are prepared to give."

Ramsey turned ghastly pale:—the next moment a crimson hue spread over his countenance;—his eyes glared with a lurid light—and his lips quivered. He looked at the Beggarman, who was cool and collected: he then glanced at the red-haired young woman, whose features were likewise calm and impassable. This survey appeared to give him courage—that ruffian-like courage with which the gentleman-villain is compelled to fortify himself in order to induce his lips to frame the words which shall express the horrible designs that have already been well digested in his secret thoughts.

"Now, then, sir—what is it to be?" demanded the Beggarman.

"You needn't fear to speak candidly to us," observed Carrotty Poll, encouragingly

"In course not," added her father. "We ain't particklar—so long as the blunt is forthcoming;" and he laughed in a manner which made Ramsey's blood run cold in his veins and his flesh creep upon his bones.

"Well—after all, you can but refuse—and there will be no harm done," said the latter, in a musing tone and after a short pause. "But it is impossible that you can misunderstand me, or a single moment! In a word—the baronet must be put out of the way—or there will be a general exposure, in which we shall *all* sink!"

"This is serious—but not *too* serious for *us* to undertake," returned the Beggarman. "At the same time, *we* don't fear anythink that may come of such an exposure as you talk of."

"Will five hundred guineas—in good sterling gold—induce you to rid us of this accursed Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded Ramsey, worked up to a pitch of desperation by the ruin that stared him in the face.

"Have you the cash by you?" asked the Beggarman.

"Yes—I have brought it with me," returned Ramsey, producing a heavy bag from beneath his cloak; "and it is yours if you will set out with me for Aylesbury—*to do the deed*—this very night."

As he uttered these last words in a hoarse whisper, he again secured the money about his person,—while his eyes were fixed with an expression of anxious inquiry upon the countenance of the burly villain.

"I will guarantee that it shall be done—but I can't do it alone," responded the latter, after a few instants' deep reflection. "Must it be done to-night?"

"We must set off for Aylesbury to-night," answered Ramsey impatiently. "Martin will be devoured with the most cruel suspense until my return: and I dare not return unless it be with the certainty that the man who holds my very life in his hand——"

"Well—we won't waste time by talking over it," interrupted the Beggarman. "But we must see the Magsman without delay. He is at the house on t'other side of the river, where the baronet was confined."

"I will accompany you to him," said Ramsey. "Come—let us depart."

"This moment," observed the Beggarman. "We must cross in a boat—but, luckily, we have a wherry of our own—and therefore we sha'n't have to go far to find a means of getting over the river. You will go with us, Poll," said the villain, darting a significant look on his daughter.

"Me, father?" she ejaculated, in a tone of unfeigned surprise.

"Yes—you," returned the Big Beggarman. "Suppose that me and the Magsman sets off at once for Aylesbury with this genelman, there'll be some orders to give you about a many little things to do in our absence."

And, as he thus spoke, he kicked his daughter's foot gently under the table.

"Very well, father," she observed. "I shall be ready in a few minutes."

"Stay—I must put on my rough coat and hat," said the Beggarman. "Beg your pardon, sir, for leaving you for a moment," he continued, addressing himself to Ramsay: "but sha'n't keep you waiting long. May be you'll take a glass of somethink short to expel the cold?"

"Nothing, I thank you," responded Ramsey. "Pray make haste: there is no time to lose," he exclaimed, with an excitement which he could not restrain.

"We shall be ready in a jiffey," said the Big Beggarman; and he thereupon followed his daughter up the steep and narrow staircase which has already been described in a previous chapter.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SCENE ON THE THAMES.

On gaining a room on the first-floor, Carrotty Poll set down the light on a table; and, looking her father full in the face, she observed in a low and sinister tone, "What do you mean to do with this swell-cove?"

"Now, look here, my gal," was the answer, unhesitatingly given: "the genelman has got five hundred golden boys about him—and them golden boys we mean to have—eh?"

"That's certain," responded Carrotty Poll, her countenance glowing with delight up to the very verge of her flaming and disordered hair.

"Well—and a murder is to be done in order to get the money—eh?" continued the bloated ruffian.

"True again: but do go on—or he'll get tired of waiting and begin to suspect something," exclaimed Poll, with vixenish sharpness. "A murder must be committed, you say?"

"To be sure. And what does it matter to us which is put out of the way—this Ramsey, or that baronet? Besides, it ain't worth while going all the way to Aylesbury to knock a fellow on the head for the purpose of getting five hundred guineas—when it can be done close by, on the river?"

"I understand you, father," said the young woman. "But you and me can't do it alone. Some one must scull the boat?"

"The Kinchin-Grand is in the public-room," answered the Big Beggarman; "and he shall come along with us."

"What! a mere boy—a youth of sixteen or seventeen?" ejaculated Carrotty Poll.

"He's a desperate fellow—and I know he'll serve

our purpose," was the impatient response. "Come—give me my hat and rough coat—and put a pair of pistols in the pockets," he added, in a gruff whisper.

The woman obeyed these instructions without another remonstrance; and as soon as she had put on her cloak, which had a large hood to cover her head—and also to conceal her features, when it was necessary to observe such mystery—the father and daughter descended to the little parlour. Ramsey was waiting for them with an impatience that had become almost intolerable;—and they all three issued forth from the crib behind the bar.

As they traversed the public room, the Big Beggarman beckoned the Kinchin-Grand to join them; and this worthy chief,—who, as it will be remembered, presided over the juvenile thieves that were wont to assemble at a certain flash house in Grub Street,—forthwith abandoned his pipe and his pewter, and followed the party from the boozing-ken.

"Now, then, Bill," said the Big Beggarman, when they had gained the street; "run and get the boat ready. We want to get across as quick as possible."

"All right!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, who was somewhat more decently—or, at all events, more warmly attired than when we first introduced him to our readers: and having uttered that cheering ejaculation, he hurried on in front to obey the orders which he had received.

The Big Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and Ramsey pursued their way in silence—the last-mentioned individual entertaining not the slightest suspicion of foul play on the part of his companions. In a few minutes they reached a place were a kind of low and narrow stone-pier went shelving down from the bank of the Thames, until it was lost in the mud at low water; whereas at high tide it was completely covered. To a post fixed by the side of this convenience for landing or embarking, a large wherry was fastened; and the Kinchin-Grand was

standing in the boat when the others made their appearance on the spot. The party entered the wherry and took their places, Ramsey being seated between the Beggarman and Carretty Poll; and the Kinchin-Grand, having pushed off, betook himself to the oars, which he managed with remarkable expertness.

The wherry shot out from the bank, upon the black bosom of the Thames, which not the feeblest twinkling of moonbeam or starlight now relieved of its sombre gloom: but as the boat drew nearer to the middle of the river, the profile of its shores was marked by the feeble glimmerings which the windows of the houses on either side shed forth.

"Now, Bill," said the Beggarman, "run down the stream. The tide's with you—and you wont have to pull much."

"I understand," answered the youthful reprobate. "Where do you want to land?"

"Just below Execution Dock," was the answer.

There was something which sounded so ominous in this reply, that Ramsey shuddered from head to foot: and now it struck him for the first time that he was in company with three persons who, although one was a woman, were no doubt capable of any atrocity. That the Beggarman was as desperate a villain as any that London contained, he was well aware: that the daughter had not failed to imbibe the example of her sire, he naturally conjectured; —and that the youth who rowed the wherry, was of an equally vile stamp, the glimpse which he had obtained of his features in the public room of the Beggar's Staff, when he was called upon to join the party, furnished pretty conclusive evidence.

All these reflections swept through the mind of Ramsey the instant that an alarm sprang up in his soul; and he repented of his rashness in trusting himself with such companions. There he was, completely at their mercy—in the midst of that silent highway where the voice that cried out for help could be stifled in a moment, and where a grave already yawned, as it were, to enshroud the corpse of a victim!

Commingling with these thoughts, too, were the horrible ideas so suddenly excited in his mind by the mention of the frightful name of *Execution Dock*—the place at which mutineers and all criminals whom the Courts of Admiralty doomed to death, underwent the extreme sentence of the blood-thirsty laws! For Ramsey knew that *he* was implicated in crimes which, if detected, would send him to the scaffold;—and it was therefore no wonder that he shuddered from head to foot as the ominous name of the proposed landing-place fell upon his ears.

"Are you certain of being enabled to find your friend Warren without delay?" he inquired, thus breaking a long silence which had prevailed since the Beggarman gave his orders to the Kinchin-Grand, and during which the boat had shot farther down the stream.

"Quite certain," was the answer, given in a tone which might have had nothing unusual in it, but which the increasing fears of Ramsey construed into a foreboding gruffness.

"And you think that he will consent to accompany us to Aylesbury to-night?" he asked, in that species of nervous humour which prompts men who entertain vague ideas of impending danger to converse with those at whose hands the peril is dreaded, in order to glean from their responses an assurance that such apprehensions are altogether unfounded.

"To be sure I do," answered the Big Beggarman. "Joe is not the feller to let a chance of sacking a good sum escape him."

"So much the better!" exclaimed Ramsey, assuming a tone of cheerfulness, which he was however far from experiencing inwardly. "Shall we soon push in for the shore?"

"There's Execution Dock right ahead of you now," returned the Beggarman, extending his arm in the direction of the ominous spot. "But perhaps your eyes don't get accustomed to the darkness quite so soon as mine?"

"I can see something that appears to hang in the air," said Ramsey, straining all the powers of his vision in order to penetrate the obscurity which prevailed all around. "It is a black object—a thing darker than the darkness——"

"Well—and that's one of them scarecrows that mark Execution Dock at times," observed the Big Beggarman, with a rough chuckling laugh, in which both his daughter and the Kinchin-Grand joined.

"A man hanging?" gasped Ramsey, as his excited imagination made the appalling object even more palpable than it really was—until the very features of the pendent corpse seemed to glare upon him with stony gaze through the darkness of the night.

"Yes—and why not?" exclaimed the Beggarman, with another coarse chuckle. "It's a pleasure to the aristocracy to hang up poor devils who haven't got any influential friends to beg 'em off. But I say, old feller," he continued, his tone experiencing a rapid and ominous change, as he laid his heavy hand rudely upon the shoulder of Ramsey, "you'd better give me that bag of guineas which you've got under your cloak."

"The guineas!" repeated the wretched man, a cold tremor passing over him and freezing the very blood in his veins.

"Oh! you hesitate—do you?" cried the Big Beggarman. "Now, Bill—keep the boat steady!"—and, thus speaking, he threw himself furiously upon Ramsey, whom he overpowered in an instant.

"Villain—miscreant—assassin!" almost screamed the desperate gentleman, as his cloak came off in the useless struggle which he endeavoured to renew against his burly opponent: but having been thrown with his back across the seat, he was unable to offer any effectual resistance, the more especially as Carrotty Poll now lent her aid to her father.

"Steady the boat, Bill—or, by God! she'll capsize," thundered the Beggarman; for the wherry was oscillating frightfully. "Now, sir—give up that gold——"

"Never!" cried Ramsey, suddenly armed with the courage of despair: and by an almost superhuman effort, he hurled the ruffian back—regaining his own feet instantly.

But Carrotty Poll, who was herself flung aside by this rapid movement on the part of the intended victim, had fallen upon his cloak which lay on the seat; and her arm had encountered something which she felt to be the bag of gold. Plunging her hand into a pocket formed in the lining of the garment, she secured herself that such was the fact;—and in a shrill tone of exultation, she cried, "I've got it father! Hold him—seize him!"

All this was the work of an instant;—and the Big

Beggarman, regaining his legs, rushed upon Ramsey—threw his arms forcibly round him—and endeavoured to hurl him into the water. But this was not so easily accomplished: it was a struggle for life on the part of the guilty lover of Lady Stamford—and his strength appeared to increase every moment. The boat swayed from side to side in a manner that threatened the entire party with instantaneous immersion—and the Kinchin-Grand, being compelled to steady it as well as he could with the oars, dared not leave his place.

"By God! we shall upset," exclaimed the Beggarman. "Come, Poll—lend a hand ——"

"Miscreant! let me go—you may keep the money—you may have it all," cried Ramsey, in a voice of rending anguish; for he felt that his strength was failing him. "I implore you—I beseech you—mercy—mercy ——"

"Bravo! Poll," ejaculated the Big Beggarman, as his daughter at that instant rendered effectual aid; and in another moment the herculean ruffian hurled the shrieking Ramsey over the side of the wherry into the river.

The boat rocked frightfully, as the murderer and murderess sank down into their seats to steady it;—and the Kinchin-Grand, pulling long and vigorous strokes with the oars, made it shoot rapidly away from the spot where this awful deed had been perpetrated.

Then arose from the bosom of the dark water in the wake of the boat, the terrific cry of the drowning man's agony,—a cry which seemed to rend the very air, and which thrilled to the brains of the guilty wretches on whose ears it fell.

"Can you see anything, father?" demanded Carrotty Poll, she and her sire alike straining their eyes in the direction of the spot where Ramsey had now gone down a second time.

"Nothing—nothing: it's all up with him," returned the Big Beggarman, impatiently—for that appalling scream had done him harm, ruffian as he was. "Pull in to the shore, Bill—and quick about it."

"Which way—Execution Dock?" cried the young reprobate;—and, without waiting for an answer, he sent the boat rapidly veering towards that point.

"No—back again—to Horslydown—damn you for a fool!" thundered the Big Beggarman, actually ferocious. "We don't mean to tell the Magsman anything about this affair at all," he added, more mildly.

"Well—don't play the bully, old feller—that's all," said the Kinchin-Grand, without losing his temper: and round went the wherry towards the opposite shore.

Silence now prevailed, and total darkness continued upon the scene,—a silence unbroken even by another cry on the part of the drowning man—and a darkness which seemed to grow more intense after the perpetration of that dread deed!

In a short time the wherry reached the stone pier whence it had started; and the Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and the Kinchin-Grand retraced their steps to the boozing-ken, where the last-mentioned individual received fifty guineas as a recompense for his share in the evening's work, as well as to bribe him to the maintenance of strict silence respecting the dreadful transaction.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MEAGLES AND THE AMAZON AT THE BOOZING-KEN.

NEARLY two hours had elapsed since the return of the Big Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and the Kinchin-Grand to the vile den in Horslydown, when the door of that place was thrown open, and Tim Meagles, accompanied by the Amazon, entered the horrible place.

For an instant the eyes of all the revellers present were turned upon Meagles, whose dashing, off-hand appearance and frank, good-humoured countenance disposed them completely in his favour: but the next moment every look was rivetted upon his companion, whose ample bust proclaimed her to be a woman, in spite of her masculine attire.

And well indeed might they gaze with admiration upon the huntress: for never had a more splendid creature burst upon their view. The cold night air had imparted the richest carnation glow to those cheeks that looked so firm and soft; and her fine large dark eyes, so clear and bright, seemed to swim in a living lustre. The black brows, well divided and rather full than thin, set off the stainless white of her high and noble forehead: her coral lips, on which a good-tempered smile was playing, half revealed the pearly teeth;—and her luxuriant hair, dark as night, and glossy as the raven's wing, showered in a myriad curls upon her shoulders. Then her bearing was so graceful and elegant—the garb which she wore so admirably became her symmetrical form, and her shape was characterised by so much unrestrained lightness, that she was all which one might expect to meet in a daring huntress, who was likewise a charming woman.

Such a character was well calculated to win the admiration of the men, and even of the women, who were assembled at the Beggar's Staff: and a murmur of gratification and delight pervaded all parts of the dingy room as the lovely Amazon paused to take a survey of the scene. But that feeling which her presence had immediately engendered, rose into absolute enthusiasm, when, taking three or four guineas from her purse, she unaffectedly tossed them upon the bar, bidding Carrotty Poll supply liquor to the amount, that the company might have the wherewith to enjoy themselves more fully than they were already doing.

Having thus obeyed the first impulse of a disposition naturally generous, Letitia followed Tim Meagles behind the bar; and in a few moments the lady and her companion were closetted with the Big Beggarman in the little parlour.

"You recollect us, my good fellow—don't you?" said Meagles, as soon as the burly landlord had closed the door of the crib.

"Yes—perfectly," was the reply. "You came here, both of you, about six or seven months ago—as near as I can remember—to see the Magsman about a certain paper in old Lightfoot's possession. I know all about it—and I likewise know who you are. You're Mr. Meagles, sir—and you're Lady Lade, ma'am," added the ruffian, with a low bow to the former and a much lower one to the latter.

"You have a good memory," said the Amazon, laughing. "But we are desirous of seeing your friend Warren—and it is about that very same business, too. Is he here to-night?"

"No, my lady—he's not," answered the Beggarman: "and he isn't expected to return till to-morrow, neither. He's over the water—at t'other house——"

"We called there in the first instance this evening," interrupted Meagles; "and he had left, without telling the man Briggs where he was going. That made us come across the river, to the Beggar's Staff: and we should have been here upwards of two hours ago, if it had not been for a little incident which delayed us. But, however," continued Meagles, "it is growing late—and we will not waste time. You know all about the business which brought us hither on the previous occasion of our visiting the Beggar's Staff; —and you can perhaps give us some necessary information now."

"Anything that I can do to serve you, sir, shall be done cheerfully," responded the Big Beggarman, well aware that he was dealing with a good paymaster.

"You already know that we came here the last time, which was six or seven months ago, about a certain paper in Lightfoot's possession," resumed Meagles; "and on that occasion your friend Warren made an appointment for us to meet him at the old man's next day. This appointment we kept: but it led to no good. Lady Letitia subsequently wrote Warren a long letter, containing particular explanations and instructions—and to this letter no answer was ever returned."

"Well—I'm surprised at the Magsman's want of attention in that respect," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, assuming as much politeness as his uncouth nature could possibly permit: "for there was something of importance to communicate, nevertheless. But I suppose that other business turned up suddenly—and he must have put off writing from time to time till he forgot it."

"And what was the subject of importance?" demanded Meagles.

"Why—the letter which her ladyship wrote, and which I saw," continued the Beggarman, "hinted at foul means to obtain the paper. Well, Lord bless you! that very same night that the letter came, me, the Magsman, and Briggs, got into old Lightfoot's crib, and tried to make him surrender the dokiment. But it was no go—and there the matter ended. But the Magsman ought to have reported it in due course."

"And is Lightfoot still dwelling in the same place?" asked the Amazon.

"God bless your sweet eyes!" ejaculated the Beggarman: "he's dead!"

"Dead!" exclaimed both Meagles and the huntress, as if it were in the same breath.

"Yes—he died three or four nights ago," returned the villain; "and his gal has bolted. So I suppose she's taken the papers and everything else with her —leaving the parish, most likely, to bury her old father: for I'm blessed if any body else will."

"Then our hopes are defeated in that quarter," said Meagles, in a tone of vexation. "It was odd that Briggs told us nothing about his death."

"The man did not know the nature of our business," observed Lady Letitia. "We never spoke to him before in our lives;—and it was only in consequence of what Warren told us last June or July—or whenever it might have been—that we were even aware of the fellow's name. We were desired, when we wanted to see Warren, to make inquiries of Briggs or else at this place."

"Just so, my lady," said the Beggarman. "Briggs is as cautious a chap as here and there one."

"But perhaps there is some way of tracing old Lightfoot's daughter," exclaimed Meagles, the thought suddenly striking him.

"We'll endeavour to do so, sir," returned the Big Beggarman; "and if we hear anything we'll let you know. I s'pose a letter, written in the inwisible ink the secret of which you bought of the Magsman, will always reach your ladyship in safety?"

"Oh! certainly," replied the Amazon. "But the address must not be invisible also," she added, laughing.

"I should rayther think not, ma'am," responded the burly villain.

"Well—you will make inquiries after Lightfoot's daughter—will you?" said Meagles, tossing down five guineas upon the table as an earnest of future recompense. "Now, Letitia," he continued, turning towards his beautiful companion, "we will take our departure: and I hope we shall not have to encounter any more adventures such as the one which detained us just now.'

"Was it so very unpleasant, sir?" asked the Beggarman, merely by way of making an observation which he fancied to be polite, and not through any sentiment of curiosity—much less on account of any suspicion of the real nature of that adventure.

"I will tell you," said Meagles. "You know already that her ladyship and myself called in the first instance this evening at the house in Shadwell or Wapping, wherever it may be. Well, not finding the Magsman there, as we have likewise already explained to you, we cut across to the stairs at Execution Dock, to take a boat ——'

"Ah! an ugly place, *that!*" exclaimed the Beggarman, suddenly becoming interested in the tale.

"Yes—it is indeed," responded Meagles: "and there's a body suspended in chains to a gibbet on the point of land, at this very moment," he added. "It was positively gloomy and dispiriting even to me and my harum-scarum friend here to listen to the dreadful creaking of the irons, as the corpse swung to and fro. But, however—we took a wherry, and were crossing the river, through a darkness so intense that it was something like the one which fell upon Egypt—I mean it might be felt——"

"Well, sir—well?" interrupted the Big Beggarman, impatiently: for he was now still more interested in the narrative—and suspicions of what was coming were rising rapidly and fearfully up in his mind.

"The waterman had scarcely pushed off the boat," continued Meagles, "when a terrific scream—apparently coming from the middle of the river—met our ears."

"And, oh! such a scream—I shall never forget it as long as I live!" exclaimed the Amazon, shuddering visibly. "It still tingles in my ears."

"It must have been very unpleasant," said the Beggarman, in whose ears that scream likewise tingled. "But pray go on, sir: you—you interest me."

"Well—it immediately struck us that it must be a man either drowning or being murdered," resumed Meagles.

"Murdered!—what made you think *that?*" demanded the ruffian, hastily.

"Oh! you may well shudder at it, my good friend," said Meagles: "for, my God! if you had heard that awful—rending—piercing scream of dying agony, you would never forget it. I ordered the

waterman to pull with all his might; though I was fearful that no good could be done, in the pitchy darkness."

"And did you—did you—see anything?" asked the Beggarman, scarcely able to hide the trouble which now filled his guilty soul.

"Egad!" exclaimed Meagles; "it was scarcely possible to see your hand at a distance of six inches from your face—although, by the bye, we *could* see the gibbet and the body through the darkness: but somehow or another, *those things* are never completely hidden, even in the blackest night. There seems to be a Providence in all *that!*"

"Dear me, Tim, how you are wandering!" cried the Amazon; "and here is the worthy landlord all impatience to hear the rest of your story. But I will tell it myself. You must know, then," she continued, addressing herself to the Big Beggarman, "that the waterman who rowed us, pulled manfully—and Mr. Meagles leant over the gunwale on one side, while I did the same on the other. All of a sudden I saw something white—yes—absolutely white through the deep darkness. It appeared abruptly—quick as the eye winks—close by my side of the wherry;—and simultaneously as I caught sight of it, I beheld enough to carry the rapid conviction to my mind that it was a human countenance."

"The devil it was!" ejaculated the Big Beggarman, summoning all his self-possession to his aid, while his guilty soul was quaking at the prospect of discovery.

"Yes—it was a human countenance," repeated the Amazon emphatically: "with the speed of thought, I mechanically stretched out my arm—and my hand clutched the hair upon the unfortunate man's head."

"And you saved him?" cried the bloated ruffian with terrific impatience, which Meagles and the Amazon however believed to arise from a feeling of humanity prompting the hope that a fellow-creature was really rescued from a watery grave.

"Mr. Meagles instantly turned to assist me—the waterman likewise lent a hand—and we succeeded in dragging the unfortunate individual into the boat," continued Lady Letitia: "but it was at the risk of our own lives—for the wherry was as nearly as possible being upset by the proceeding."

"And did he speak?—did he say anything?" demanded the guilty ruffian, his fears becoming every instant more appalling.

"He was senseless—and we thought that life must be extinct," replied the huntress. "But we bade the waterman pull back to Execution Dock as quickly as he could—and during the few minutes which thus elapsed, Mr. Meagles rubbed the poor gentleman's hands briskly between his own, while I chafed his temples. By the time the wherry reached the stairs again, we had the satisfaction of knowing that the vital spark was still flickering."

"Ah! a very pleasant satisfaction," observed the Big Beggarman, who could have killed the Amazon and Tim Meagles both—then and there—for what he considered to be their "cursed officiousness" in endeavouring to restore Philip Ramsey to life. "And pray, my lady, what did you do next?" he inquired, still maintaining as much outward composure as possible.

"We landed, and bore the gentleman to the nearest public-house——"

"The Mariners' Arms, I'll be bound!" exclaimed the Beggarman.

"Yes—that was the sign: for the name is painted on the lamp," said Meagles.

"Well, we had our unfortunate charge, who was still senseless, conveyed to a chamber," continued Lady Letitia Lade; "and while Meagles and the landlord stripped and put him to bed, I myself ran for the nearest surgeon, whom I speedily found, although perfectly ignorant of that precious neighbourhood."

"And then, I suppose, the doctor pretty soon recovered the genelman?" observed the ruffian.

"By the time I returned, accompanied by the medical man, the patient was already so far recalled to his senses that he was conscious of the attentions which were being ministered," answered the huntress: "but he was still utterly unable to speak—and the doctor said that many hours might elapse before he would regain sufficient strength to enable him to utter a word."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Big Beggarman, much relieved. "What sort of a looking fellow was he, my lady?" he inquired, although entertaining scarcely any doubt of the identity of this gentleman with Philip Ramsey.

"Tall—handsome—genteel," replied Meagles: "slightly made—and not thirty years old yet, I should think. Poor gentleman! it will have been a narrow escape indeed, even if he should ultimately recover."

"Is there any danger still, then?" demanded the Big Beggarman, hastily.

"Of course there is," responded Meagles: "but the doctor seemed to think he would get over it. However, Lady Letitia and myself did all we could for him—and, come what may, we have nothing to reproach ourselves for. He had but little money in his pockets—and we therefore left sufficient with the landlord of the tavern for present purposes, until we call to inquire after him again."

"Then you don't know who the gentleman is?" said the Beggarman.

"There was not a paper—nor a card—nor any document whatever about his person to afford the slightest clue to his name or abode," answered Tim Meagles: "but his dress and appearance bespoke him to be a gentleman."

"Well, the adwentur' was a singular one," observed the Big Beggarman, who, during the latter part of this conversation, had been revolving a certain scheme in his head: for this rescue and resuscitation of Ramsey seemed to menace the villain with serious peril. "But won't you take some little refreshment, sir—and you, my lady—after the fatigues you've both gone through this cold night?"

"Nothing, I thank you," answered Meagles. "Come, Letitia—we will depart."

The Beggarman affected to open the door officiously—but, instantly turning back again towards the huntress and her companion, he exclaimed, "Well—this is fortunate! There's Joe Warren just come in—and he's gone up by a private way to his own room."

"We may as well see him, in that case," said Meagles, pleased at the intelligence thus abruptly conveyed.

"To be sure," observed the Amazon. "Perhaps he may suggest some scheme which may put us upon the track of Lightfoot's daughter."

"No doubt of it, my lady," returned the Beggarman. "This way, if you please."

As he uttered these words, the ruffian took the candle in his hand, and conducted his visitors up the steep and narrow staircase which has been already described. Continuing the ascent until they reached the left, the party proceeded in silence: but when the Beggarman removed the straw and raised the trap-door, Meagles exclaimed, "What! have we only come up to this height for the purpose of going down again?"

"Our friend Joe Warren likes to have his private chamber made all safe and secure," answered the Big Beggarman, with a chuckling laugh; "'cause why—there's a reward offered for his apprehension, and the constables know he frequents this house at times. Indeed, if I couldn't rely upon you, Mr. Meagles, and on her ladyship, I shouldn't be ass enough to let you both into the secrets of my crib."

"You have nothing to fear from us, my good fellow," said Meagles.

"Oh! I am well assured of that, sir!" exclaimed the Beggarman, in an assumed tone of hearty confidence. "Please to follow me down these steps—and in a few moments you'll be with Warren."

Meagles and the Amazon unhesitatingly complied with this invitation; and at the bottom of the stairs, the Beggarman, throwing open a door, stood aside to allow them to enter the chamber. They crossed the threshold: and as the light of the candle which the Beggarman held high up, did not reveal to them the presence of the person whom they expected to meet, they simultaneously turned looks of inquiry upon the ruffian. But the door was instantaneously closed with violence;—and they heard the strong bolts shooting into their sockets on the outer side. In another moment the heavy steps of the Beggarman ascending the stairs, fell upon their ears—and then all was silent!

"We are betrayed, Tim!" exclaimed the Amazon, grasping her companion's arm at hazard in the midst of the deep darkness which pervaded the room.

"It seems so, my beauty," returned Meagles. "But cheer up—and the devil's in it if we're not a match for this scoundrel in the long run."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER DARK PLOT.—A DARING ADVENTURE.

On descending into his little parlour, after perpetrating this deed of treachery, the Big Beggarman hastily summoned his daughter from the bar; and, closing the door, he communicated to her all that had taken place.

Carrotty Poll was at first sorely troubled when she learnt that Ramsey had not only been rescued from a watery grave, but was likely to recover altogether; and she impatiently inquired of her father what he proposed to do.

"The business is awkward—very awkward," said the Beggarman: "but my mind is made up to a particular course, if so be you've pluck enough to help me."

"I will do anything, provided I see the utility of it," answered the vile young woman. "But, after all, what have we to dread from this Ramsey? He dares not peach against us. We can tell things of him that would send him to Tuck-up Fair—can't we? Didn't he do as much as admit that he and Martin had committed the numerous forgeries of which Sir Richard Stamford is accused?—and then didn't he pass off all the spurious coin? Really, father, I don't see, when we come to look well at the matter, that there's so much to fear."

"There's everything to fear, I tell you," said the Big Beggarman, savagely. "Don't I know what natur' is?—and suppose that Ramsey shouldn't survive this night's business, but just recover his senses sufficient to peach—isn't there a chance of his repenting on his death-bed of his own sins, and confessing everything to some humbug of a parson? Then out would come all about the spurious coin—the carrying off of Sir Richard Stamford—and this precious evening's affair;—and where should we be? Why—in the Stone Jug before we could look round us."

"That's true enough," observed Carrotty Poll, struck by the soundness of her father's reasoning.

"And then, again," continued the Beggarman, "supposing that Ramsey should recover altogether—wouldn't he be sure to tell the Magsman how we served him out?—and there isn't a more vindictive fellow in all the world than Joe Warren. If he went to the gallows himself along with us, he'd take us there out of pure revenge. And even if he didn't, he'd cut us for ever—and we can't very well do without him. Then there's another point to be considered," added the herculean ruffian, thus rapidly surveying every feature of the emergency in which he and his daughter were placed; "this Tim Meagles and Lady Lade will go and see Ramsey to-morrow—and they will perhaps fish out of him all that has happened; and though they wouldn't very well dare to tell a magistrate, seeing that they have been mixed up with us in this business of trying to get old Lightfoot's papers,—still they would be sure to tell the Magsman—and there we are floored again."

"What do you propose to do, then?" demanded Poll, crossing her thin freckled arms across her scraggy breast.

"I propose to keep Meagles and her ladyship here until to-morrow night," answered the Big Beggarman; "and in the meantime ——"

"In the meantime the Magsman may come and want his room," interrupted Poll sharply.

"I can stall him off for a day or two, my dear," observed her father. "Won't it be easy to tell him that Grumley and his men have been seen lurking about the neighbourhood?"

"Well—go on. What next?" demanded the red-haired young woman.

"You must tog yourself off in your best clothes without a moment's delay," said the Beggarman "and you must cross the river as soon as possible. Ramsey is lying at the Mariners' Arms—and you ain't known there. You'll pretend to be his sister—or wife—or cousin—or anything you like; and you'll say that having missed your unfortunate husband or relative, as the case may be, you made inquiries, and was horror-struck to hear that a gentleman answering his description had been fished out of the Thames this evening. You can hint that he's touched *here*," continued the Beggarman, tapping his forehead significantly; "and that you suppose he attempted to commit suicide in a fit of madness."

"I understand," exclaimed Poll. "Go on."

"Well—of course you'll be dreadfully afflicted—and the people at the Mariners' Arms will feel very much for you. You'll insist on passing the night by

the bed-side of the dear man," continued the astute villain; "and you'll have to force gruel, brandy-and-water, and what not, down his throat. Of course you'll be alone with him—and a good dose of the *Heir's Friend* will put him out of the way altogether," added the Big Beggarman, sinking his voice to the lowest audible whisper, while his hideous countenance expressed all the diabolical significancy of his dark design. "Now do you see my meaning, old gal?"

"I do," answered Carrotty Poll, in an equally subdued and sombre tone. "Anything more?"

"To be sure!" resumed the miscreant, experiencing an infernal satisfaction at the evident approval which his project met at the hands of his daughter. "Towards morning you'll alarm the whole house with your dreadful shrieks—the landlord and landlady will go rushing in—and your poor dear husband or brother will be no more. The doctor will be sent for—all attempts to restore him will be useless. He'll hem and hah—'*consequences of immersion in water*,' and so forth; and then, for family reasons, you would rayther there shouldn't be a inquest. A five pound note will hush up the affair: you get a shell to-morrow—he's put in it—you take him away to Briggs's—and before night he's under ground. Meagles and Lady Letitia may then go and inquire after him as much as they choose."

"But what excuse shall you make for having locked 'em up till to-morrow night?" demanded Poll.

"Why—they can't possibly couple my conduct towards them with this affair of Ramsey," answered the Big Beggarman: "because they don't suspect that you or I had anything to do with it. In fact, they don't know who the man is—nor whether he came in the water by foul play, or accident, or of his own accord. I shall therefore tell them that there was something in their manner I didn't like—I thought it looked suspicious—and I was fearful they were laying a plant to catch the Magsman for some reason or another. I'll have a conversation with them to-morrow night on the subject, and then pretend to be convinced by their arguments that they meant really nothing but what was straight-for'ard and fair. Oh! leave me to deal with them: you play your part well—and we shall get out of this scrape as nice as ninepence."

"Very good," observed Poll: "I'll go up and dress at once."

"And mind you disguise yourself as much as possible," said the Beggarman.

"Never fear," was the response. "Tell the Kinchin-Grand not to go away, as I shall want him to take me over in the wherry."

"All right!" exclaimed her father; and, opening the door, he stepped into the bar, while his delectable daughter hastened up-stairs to arrange her toilette.

In half-an-hour she descended again into the little parlour; and the Beggarman, observing that she was there, went in to satisfy himself that her disguise was sufficient. He had not the slightest fault to find. Her hair was dyed a deep colour, and was carefully arranged in bands: her complexion was darkened to an olive hue;—her very eye-brows and lashes were stained black. She was well dressed—largely padded, so as to create an artificial fulness and plumpness which she did not naturally possess—and, in fine, had effected such a complete transformation in her appearance, that her own father would not have known her if they had met accidentally in the street, and if he had never seen her accomplish the same change before.

"That will do splendidly!" exclaimed the ruffian, his countenance expanding into a grin of delight. "Have you got the—you know what?"

"The phial is here," she answered, significantly tapping the wadded bosom of her silk gown. "Now, help me on with my cloak:—and put up my hood in such a way that it shan't tumble my hair. Those people in the public room musn't see that I am going out such a swell at this time of night; neither must they notice that I'm so changed and pranked up. There—that's right. Now, is the Kinchin-Grand ready?"

"He's gone down to wait for you at the pier," answered the Big Beggarman. "I thought it was better that he should not be seen following you again—as he went out with us in the early part of the evening."

"Good," observed the woman: and, having received some money of her father, she quitted the boozing-ken—her head being so completely concealed in the hood of her cloak, that no one noticed the altered appearance of her features.

The Big Beggarman then sate down in the bar, to smoke his pipe and drink his hot brandy-and-water—while the seedy waiter dispensed the liquors to the various revellers.

We must now return to Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade, whom we left at the moment when they found themselves locked in the chamber whither they had been allured under the false hope of meeting Joe the Magsman.

"It is easy enough to tell me to cheer up, Tim," said the Amazon, in answer to the observation which her companion made, and which we recorded at the end of the preceding chapter: "but I really can find little to be cheerful for. Nevertheless, I am not going to cry—nor yet yield to despair. What do you think is the meaning of all this?"

"I can begin to read the matter—dimly, it is true," replied Meagles, in a subdued whisper: "but still I can see a glimmering which promises to lighten the darkness enveloping this treachery."

"And what are your suspicions?" inquired the huntress, as she leant upon his arm.

"Did you observe nothing peculiar in the ruffian's manner when we were telling him the story about the rescue of that gentleman from the water?" said Meagles.

"It struck me once or twice that his remarks were singular, and that he even appeared troubled," returned Lady Letitia: "but I fancied that he was experiencing a deep interest in the narrative."

"Such was the construction which I put upon his words and conduct at the time," said Meagles: "but now that I begin to reflect seriously upon it all, I am convinced that the fellow was in some way or another connected with the affair of that gentleman. He asked so many questions, and seemed so anxious to glean every particular, that the thing looks very suspicious; and you may depend upon it, we should never have experienced this treachery, or been thus ensnared if we had not told the scoundrel the story of our adventure."

"It was certainly ridiculous on our part to imagine

that such a man could feel any really humane interest in the matter," observed the Amazon. "But if he be capable of murdering or endeavouring to murder one person," she added with a shudder, "he is not likely to be very particular how he deals with others."

"I do not for a moment apprehend that the villain entertains any such black design in respect to us my dear Letitia," said Meagles, passing his arm round the lady's waist and pressing her to him. "But rely upon it, that not a hair of *your* head shall be hurt while life remains in my body."

"Oh! I am well assured of *that*, dear Tim," she replied, caressing him tenderly. "Moreover, although I am but a poor weak woman, I possess the spirit and daring of a man: and my own existence would not be sold without a desperate struggle."

"It may suit the fellow's purpose to keep us prisoners here for some hours—perhaps even days," observed Meagles: "but we will try and defeat him. Now, my beauty," he added, whispering softly in his fair companion's ear, "let us see whether we cannot effect our escape. The adventure will be pleasant one—eh?"

"Delightful, Tim!" responded the Amazon, her glowing bosom palpitating against his breast with the excitement of the idea. "But how shall we proceed? It is as dark as pitch—and we cannot even obtain a glimpse of anything in the room."

"There is a window somewhere in this direction," said Meagles, groping his way cautiously. "I saw enough of the chamber during the few moments that the ruffian held the light at the door, to observe its principal features. Ah! here it is!"

He drew aside the curtain which covered the small casement; and the room was just so much relieved of its black darkness, as to enable the two friends to trace the outlines of each other's form, without however distinguishing a feature of the countenance.

"Now let us find a chair, my beauty," said Meagles: "and you shall sit on my knee for a few minutes, while we hold a council of war. There—that's right. Now give me a kiss—and we will begin our discussion. Good!" he exclaimed, when the Amazon had withdrawn her moist lips from his own. "In the first place, let us reflect in which part of the house we are located."

"This window must look out at the back," said Letitia, who was seated on Meagles' knee, with one arm round his neck. "Of *that* I am confident, judging by the situation of the staircases which we mounted and the turnings we took."

"Yes—you are right enough," observed her companion, after a few moments' reflection. "The next point to consider is, on which floor are we? The house is not a high one—*that* we know: as we have seen it from the outside. We ascended two flights of stairs—and that loft which we entered may be called the second storey. Well, then we descended again to this crib;—and consequently we are on the first-floor. Now, having ascertained so important a point, it remains to be determined whether we can escape from the window. Let us see if it is protected by bars."

Meagles rose, and cautiously opened the casement. There was no iron-work to prevent an egress in that direction: but when he looked forth and endeavoured to penetrate the intense darkness without, he could not possibly discover how deep the yard lay below. That there was a yard, or some such enclosure at the back of the premises, he however felt convinced: because the adjacent buildings hemmed in with their black walls a small square open space.

But it did not at all follow that this yard must be upon the same level with the street. There might be under-ground kitchens belonging to the premises; in which case the yard would be a dozen feet, or even more, lower than the ground in front of the house. The object, then, was to form a rope long enough to meet this contingency.

Having carefully discussed all the chances for and against them, Tim Meagles and the Amazon resolved to undertake the adventure. Once let them get down into the yard, and they were resolved to arm themselves with anything they could convert into weapons of defence, and then endeavour to fight their way through all opposition which might present itself. There was also the probability of the existence of some outlet from the back part of the premises; in which case they would be spared the necessity of attempting to force their way through the house. At any rate, they were determined to risk the venture: and, if they failed, they could but be made captives again.

"Now, my Amazonian confederate," said Tim Meagles, gaily, "let us see whether the bed will furnish us with materials sufficient for our purpose: otherwise all our fine schemes melt into the air at once."

Groping their way in the dark to the alcove in which the bed stood, they speedily satisfied themselves that the sheets, the blankets, and the coverlid were all there: and to work they went. Meagles had a clasp-knife with him; and the articles of bedding just enumerated, were soon cut into halves. They then twisted the pieces, and fastened them together; and having calculated the greatest height which the window could possibly be from the yard below, they found that the rope thus manufactured was amply long enough. But to make sure doubly sure, they likewise cut the carpet into strips, which they plaited together; and then attached this supplementary piece to the rest.

Having accomplished this important incident in their proceedings, Tim Meagles and his heroic assistant removed the bed close up to the window, in order that there should be some solid object unto which they might fasten one end of the rope.

"Now, Letitia dear, I shall descend first," said Tim: "and then I can steady the rope for you."

"No—I am lighter than you," observed the huntress, emphatically: "and I will go first."

"But for the very reason that you are so much lighter, my darling," exclaimed Meagles, "the rope will oscillate all the more dangerously. In a word, I insist upon descending before you—or I abandon the attempt at once."

"Well—have your own way, you wilful fellow," said the Amazon. "But kiss me first—and then away with you."

Meagles embraced his heroic companion; and then, disengaging himself from her arms—for during a few moments she clung to him as if entertaining a presentiment that some dreadful accident was about to happen to him—the intrepid Tim passed himself, limbs foremost, out of the window.

Courageous as Lady Letitia naturally was, she shuddered and felt sick at heart as she beheld her paramour clinging to the rope outside the casement: but a few reassuring words which he conveyed to her in a subdued whisper, relieved her of the apprehen-

sions which had struck a chill to her heart—and a glowing excitement sprang up in her bosom.

She looked forth from the window: but when Meagles had descended a few feet, his form became absorbed in the utter darkness which prevailed;—and the Amazon, with suspended breath and upheaved bosom, listened to assure herself that he was performing the perilous journey in safety. She likewise kept her hands upon the rope to feel if it continued to maintain that tightness of tension which the weight of Meagles imparted to it;—and thus two minutes dragged their slow length along!

But at the expiration of that time the rope became suddenly loose in her grasp;—and immediately afterwards it was shaken from beneath—the serpentine motion thus given to it undulating up to the very extremity where it was attached to the heavy bedstead. Then the Amazon knew that Meagles had descended in safety, and that the coast was clear below;—and, animated with a still more fervid excitement than before—for she entertained no fears on her own account—the brave woman committed herself to the rudely-formed rope.

Meagles held it firmly in the yard beneath, and likewise kept it at a convenient distance from the wall of the house: the task, so far as it regarded the adventurous lady, was therefore much facilitated.

And now, with her delicate hands grasping the twisted sheet and blanket, and with her legs clutching it also, the Amazon gradually lowered herself—each knot in the rope tempering the rapidity of her descent,—until she reached the bottom in safety, and was caught in the arms of the delighted Tim Meagles.

Well, indeed, was it for them that they had made their rope of such a length: for the yard was far below the level of the street on which the front of the house looked.

Not a moment was now to be lost. The sounds of uproarious revelry reached their ears from the pub-

tic room, and warned them that they had still much to contend against, unless there were an outlet from that yard otherwise than through the house. But a few moments' rapid investigation convinced them that there was not: and no alternative remained but to adopt their original resolution of forcing their way into the street.

A low window, apparently belonging to a kitchen, looked into the yard; and as no light shone forth, they concluded that the place was unoccupied at the moment. Thither they accordingly penetrated; and, their conjecture as to the nature of the room being correct, they provided themselves with the fire-irons as weapons of defence. Meagles then led the way up a narrow and dark flight of stairs, with a formidable shovel in his hand: while the Amazon followed, wielding a huge poker.

Slowly and noiselessly did they proceed, until a door at the top of the steps barred their passage; and the close vicinity of shouts and laughter informed them that this door led direct into the public room.

"The moment I open," said Meagles to the Amazon, in a whisper only just audible, "do you spring into the apartment and make for the street. Attempt not to look behind you—don't waste a thought upon me—every instant will be precious. We have got thus far—and we will not spoil the adventure by any folly on our part."

"I am ready," responded the Amazon, grasping the fire-iron firmly.

The door flew open—and she darted into the room. Meagles was close behind her;—and their sudden appearance, armed as they were, made all the revellers leap from their seats and crowd round them in an instant.

"Let us pass, good people!" exclaimed Meagles, raising his formidable weapon over his head, and sweeping the host of villanous faces with his menacing looks.

"Stop them!" thundered the Big Beggarman, rushing from behind the bar: and, elbowing his way with marvellous rapidity through the group, he laid a violent grasp upon the collar of the Amazon's coat.

Without an instant's hesitation the heroic lady felled the ruffian with a tremendous blow dealt by the heavy poker: and the Big Beggarman lay senseless at her feet.

"Serve him right!" ejaculated a dozen voices.

"She has got a noble spirit of her own!" cried one, following up the cry.

"She treated us just now like a Princess, as she is," vociferated another.

"And I will treat you again, good people—if you will aid us to escape from the clutches of that treacherous villain," cried Lady Letitia, pointing indignantly down at the Beggarman: then, at the next moment, she drew out her purse and showered its glittering contents amongst the delighted men and women gathered around.

An instantaneous scramble took place; and Meagles, seizing Letitia by the hand, led her hurriedly forth from the vile den. Not a finger was raised to bar their passage: they gained the street in safety—and, on pausing for a moment at the end of Horsleydown to listen, they could hear the enthusiastic shouts of the motley company in the *boozing-ken*, but not a footstep in pursuit.

Throwing away their weapons, they exchanged hasty syllables of congratulation at this successful adventure, and plunged hand in hand into the maze of streets lying between Horsleydown and the vicinity of London Bridge.

In half-an-hour they reached the main thoroughfare in Southwark; and thence they took a hackney-coach to Meagles' lodgings in Jermyn Street, where they arrived shortly after one o'clock in the morning. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate—a good cold supper was spread upon the table—and the two friends speedily indemnified themselves for the fatigues, annoyances, and perils they had encountered during the past five or six hours. They then retired to repose in each other's arms, it being too late for the Amazon to return to her own dwelling.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CARROTTY POLL'S RETURN TO THE BOOZING-KEN.

When Lady Letitia Lade emptied her purse amongst the revellers at the Beggar's Staff, there was such a scramble for the gold and silver thus lavishly poured forth, that not a soul thought of rendering assistance to the Big Beggarman, who lay senseless on the floor, stunned by the blow the Amazon had so effectually dealt him. And all the while the men and women were employed in picking up and searching for the coin, they vociferated the most enthusiastic cries in praise of the generosity of the beautiful huntress.

At length an old crone, who had succeeded in securing a guinea as her share of the bounteous gift, took compassion upon the burly landlord; and the waiter, having likewise profited by the scramble, now proceeded in a leisurely manner to lend his aid. Some water was sprinkled upon the ruffian's countenance—some brandy was poured down his throat—and in a short time he opened his eyes.

His senses were however slow in resuming their empire—for the chastisement he had received was severe: and when at last he was enabled to collect his scattered ideas, and exercise the powers of his memory, he broke out into the most diabolical imprecations against the whole company for having allowed Meagles and Lady Lade to escape. This proceeding on his part only provoked the laughter, jeers, and low witticisms of those whom he thus reviled; but his wrath was somewhat appeased on learning that the Amazon had showered gold and silver in profusion amongst the crew,—for the greedy ruffian was well aware that the larger portion thereof would find its way into his till ere sunrise.

A strong glass of hot brandy-and-water, the alcoholic spirit preponderating in quantity over the elementary fluid, restored the Big Beggarman pretty well to his ordinary humour: but he still experienced a racking pain in the head. Being curious to discover how his late captives could possibly have made their escape, he ascended to the chamber where he had imprisoned them;—and the bed dragged up to the window—the open casement—the absence of all the sheets, blankets, and coverlid, as well as the very carpet—and then the rope itself, rapidly developed to his amazed comprehension the desperate means which had been adopted by Meagles and the Amazon to

emancipate themselves from confinement at the Beggar's Staff.

Atrocious villain though he were, and savage as he felt at the circumstance of this escape, he could not help admiring the courage which the incident displayed on the part of the fugitives.

Retracing his way to the bar, he described all he had seen to the company present: for they already knew quite enough to render it unnecessary to keep from them the most wonderful episode in the history of the escape;—and those who heard him, soon became too much absorbed in the interest of the details which he thus gave them, to find leisure to question him as to his original motives for imprisoning Meagles and the lady at all.

Vociferous was the applause with which the health of the daring couple was proposed and drunk;—and the orgie was continued in a manner well suiting the vile place and well worthy of the vagabonds, thieves, prostitutes, and hideous wretches assembled there.

Are there such houses, and are there such people, in London at the present day? This is a question which many of our readers will ask themselves and each other. The reply is a bold affirmative: for most assuredly there *are!* And whose fault is it? That of the Government and the Legislature!

Yes—it is the fault of our rulers that the noxious weeds of vice and demoralization flourish in such luxuriant rankness as they do. What do your lords and baronets know of the poorer classes?—what notion can they possibly have of the causes of that terrible depravity which exists, in such widely spread and intricate ramifications, amongst those whom they denominate *the lower orders?* They make grand speeches upon the immorality of the millions—and they taunt the victims of vice with their profligacy: but they do nothing—absolutely nothing—to establish a remedy. It is monstrous and absurd to take an aristocrat and make him a Minister. He naturally labours only to aggrandize the Order to which he belongs—and he utterly neglects the People. Thus the millions are inevitably sacrificed to a wealthy, despotic, and luxurious oligarchy.

Let a Minister be taken from the People,—a man who knows what the People are—who has made himself acquainted with all the miseries of the poorer classes, and who understands the springs and causes of that demoralization which fills the low boozing-kens with revellers, and furnishes so many victims to the scaffold, the penal settlement, the hulks, and the gaol—aye, and so many prostitutes to the streets. Such a man would be well aware how to grapple with the evil. *He* knows that Poverty—and nothing but poverty—is the origin of the tremendous mischief, which exists as a shame and a scandal in that country so falsely called *Free and Civilized England.*

And what causes this Poverty—this Penury—this Destitution which renders intolerable the lives of *millions* in a country naturally possessing, in the resources of its soil and the enterprise of its sons, every element of a consummate prosperity? It is the fact that all the land and all the wealth are held in the possession of a few: it is the abhorrent anomaly that where one has plenty—a thousand are starving,—where one counts his money by hundreds of pounds, a million count theirs by pence! The iniquitous laws of primogeniture and entail—the absence of any statute to regulate the accumulation of capital—the awful monopoly which capital so accumulated constitutes, and the tremendous tyranny which it engenders,—these are the springs of that Pauperism which sits like an incubus upon the bosom of fair Britannia!

Oh! deplorable—heart-rending—and shocking is it to contemplate the misery in which the toiling, industrious millions of these islands exist! "*Death from starvation*"—this is a common verdict returned by Coroners' juries in this country. Will ye believe it, O glorious people of France?—will ye believe it, O enviable people of the United States of America?

Our sickly sentimentalists and maudlin saints raise their eyes and lift up their hands with horror, when they talk of negro slavery in the land of Washington. But they forget—no, they do not forget—they wilfully shut their eyes to the truth that the enslaved blacks in the United States are an enviable race when compared with our English myriads of famishing sons and daughters of toil and our starving paupers. Talk of tyranny and oppression! Why—where is greater tyranny practised than in England towards the poor? O ye vile hypocrites who assemble at Exeter Hall! dare not to say a word against the fine people of the Transatlantic Union, when so much cruelty is practised in this country! There breathes not a nobler—more generous—more enlightened—more free—nor more estimable nation on the face of God's earth than the Americans:—slavery is a black spot upon their civilisation, it is true—but that spot is absolutely white when compared with the stain of hellish dye which the miseries of our own poor stamp upon the name of England!

To resume the thread of our narrative: long was the orgie continued at the Beggar's Staff. Ribald jokes elicited peals of laughter: obscene songs were welcomed with vociferous applause. An occasional quarrel and consequent fight varied the interest of the proceedings; and at last two or three of the younger women present stripped themselves stark naked and danced madly under the influence of brandy. Their lascivious movements, disgusting attitudes, and abominable freaks raised the delight of the spectators to a positive delirium;—and the liquor flowed so plenteously that the Big Beggarman was perfectly correct in his calculation that every penny of the sum so liberally bestowed by the Amazon would find its way ere morning into his till.

At length, between four and five o'clock, some of the vagabonds and prostitutes began to stagger away to their own dens: others, who were utterly incapable of taking care of themselves, were borne off by their less inebriate friends;—and gradually a clearance took place. For a short time the singing and shouting were transferred to the adjacent streets; and the neighbours, who were startled from their slumbers by the untimely din, thus received unmistakable warning that the company at the Beggar's Staff was breaking up.

Thus, while at the West End of London titled dowagers were sleeping comfortably with their fat butlers, widowed ladies of rank with their handsome footmen, Honourable Misses with the noble father's pretty pages, and fashionable demireps with elegant guardsmen,—while, in fact, the luxurious immorality and voluptuous profligacy of the *upper classes*

enjoyed all the delights of secure and well concealed sin,—the loathed and despised wretches of the vile districts of the metropolis were quitting their orgies and returning to their squalor, their rags, and their wretchedness in those dens which they called *their homes!*

The slipshod waiter had closed the door of the Beggar's Staff—extinguished the lights in the public room—and retired to his bed which he made up in the kitchen;—but the Big Beggarman remained smoking and drinking in the little parlour behind the bar, in case his daughter should return before the place was opened to the morning customers.

On ordinary occasions this man could drink an incredible quantity of potent liquor without experiencing its intoxicating effects: but, in the present instance, he was far advanced towards a stage of complete ebriety. Not only had he considerably exceeded his usual *quantum*, large as this allowance invariably was; but the exciting occurrences of the evening and the night, not forgetting the severe blow on the head which he received from Lady Letitia, had assisted the brandy in exercising a strong influence over him.

But still he continued to drink and smoke, until his countenance glowed like a furnace—the flesh round his eyes became so swollen that the twinkling orbs seemed buried in valleys of a purply livid flesh—and every vein in his forehead was swollen almost to bursting.

It was about six o'clock on that cold, misty, winter's morning, when an imperious knock at the street door of the establishment aroused the Big Beggarman from his solitary orgie; and staggering cumbrously out of the parlour, he proceeded to answer the summons. As he had suspected, it was Carrotty Poll who thus sought admission;—and, on entering the place, she proceeded without uttering a word into the bar, where she helped herself to a large dram of brandy. Then, sinking almost exhausted upon a chair in the parlour, while her father resumed his own seat, she threw back her hood and revealed a countenance a trifle more menacing in its vixenish ferocity than that of a tiger-cat.

"Well, Poll—what is the matter?" demanded the Beggarman, speaking with the hiccough and the thickness of ebriety. "You seem out of sorts a bit. But tell us what you've done?"

"Nothing — nothing at all!" replied the young woman, who appeared as if she would have given worlds to have had some one to vent her diabolical ill-humour upon. "The thing has been a dead failure: and what's more, the Magsman knows all about it."

"Then you must have been and told him, you slut!" exclaimed the ruffian, savagely.

"You're a liar, father," shrieked Carrotty Poll, in the most thrilling intonation of her vixenish voice. "But it's no wonder that you begin to abuse me—for you're as drunk as a beast."

"Well—p'raps I am," said the Beggarman, chuckling: for he was in that state when the very accusation of being intoxicated appeared a capital joke. "But, come—we won't quarrel, Poll," he added, more seriously. "Tell us all that has happened. First, however, let me know whether the Magsman is much put out concerning this affair."

"He didn't seem to care very much about it; but he insisted that you would let Meagles and Lady Letitia go away in safety the moment I came back to give you this message," observed Carrotty Poll; "for they are good people—and he knows very well that they won't trouble themselves about you or your concerns."

"By goles! they've gone of their own accord," said the Beggarman.

"Gone!—what—escaped?" ejaculated his daughter, with unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes: mizzled—bolted," rejoined the villain;—and he proceeded to relate the manner in which the prisoners had emancipated themselves—not forgetting to mention the chastisement inflicted upon him by the Amazon.

"Ah! she's a woman of spirit—a splendid creature!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, who was in such a bad humour with her father that she was rejoiced to hear of his misadventure.

"But do tell us all that has taken place in your affair," again urged the Beggarman. "How the devil came it to prove a failure?—and how was it that the Magsman heard anything about it?"

"I'll explain the whole business in a very few words," said the young woman; "and then I shall be off to bed—for I'm tired, and ill, and disgusted."

"And why the deuce are you disgusted?" demanded her father, brutally.

"Because you've managed the whole affair badly," replied Poll. "But I'll tell you what has happened. The Kinchin-Grand ferried me over to Execution Dock;—and I told him to make his boat fast and go somewhere in the neighbourhood to amuse himself—but to mind and go down to the wherry every hour to see if I was there waiting for him. Well, I went on to the Mariners' Arms and played the tragedy heroine to perfection," continued the young woman, getting into a better humour at the remembrance of her skill in enacting the part to which she alluded. "I inquired amidst a torrent of tears for my 'beloved husband'—taking very good care, however, to ascertain that he still continued speechless, before I went up into his room. And when I got there, I found to my annoyance that the officious landlady had provided a nurse to attend upon him. I threw myself upon him, and kissed him, I can assure you, with a very great deal of sincerity: for he is really an uncommon handsome young man, and I don't wonder at Lady Stamford's taste. He was quite conscious, but unable to move or speak: however, I saw that he was amazed by my caresses—especially as, thanks to my disguise, he could not form the least notion who I was. At last he closed his eyes, as if to collect his ideas and ponder who I could be; and I seized that opportunity to tell the old nurse that he was touched in the brain and had not recognised me. But it struck me that the woman eyed me with suspicion: she seemed to have an idea that something was wrong, although she couldn't perhaps tell what. Ramsey fell asleep—and we sate watching by his side. Several times I suggested that certain things should be done, in the hope of getting the old wretch to leave the room, if only for a moment: but she always found some excuse for sticking at her post. I could have strangled the crone outright," added Poll, bitterly: "but I was compelled to be civil to her—and this put me into a still worse humour."

"Devilish provoking!" exclaimed the Beggarman. "But go on."

"Well—several hours passed in this annoying way," continued Poll; "and at last Ramsey awoke

again. He muttered a few inarticulate words, and then began to gaze steadfastly upon me. I was forced to caress him—but he repulsed me with aversion; for he had by this time recovered sufficient power to enable him to use his hands feebly. I whispered to the old nurse that his brain was still wandering;—and she smiled faintly—I thought, incredulously. Some medicine had been sent by the doctor—and I was resolved to make an effort to accomplish the purpose in view. I accordingly approached the mantel—turned my back towards the nurse in such a way that she could not see what I was doing—and hastily mixed some of the poison with the draught. Then, advancing towards the bed, I told the nurse to raise the patient in her arms, while I administered the dose. She obeyed me instantly—and I began to think that my idea of being suspected by her was unfounded. But never—never shall I forget the change that came rapidly over Ramsey's countenance, as he sate up, supported by the old woman. He first gazed on me for a few instants with the most steadfast earnestness: then his features expressed a horror which in less than a minute completely convulsed them—and all in a moment, like a flash of lightning, he recognised me!"

"What—did he say so?" demanded the young woman's father.

"No: but I saw it in his manner—in his countenance," responded Carrotty Poll. "It was as easy to read what was passing in his mind, as if it was a printed book. And then his conduct showed that he knew who I was in spite of my disguise: for the instant I put the glass to his lips, he recovered power enough to dash it out of my hand, and exclaim, '*No! no!*' The nurse let him fall back upon his pillow; and he covered his face with his hands, moaning in a piteous manner. '*His brain wanders still,*' I said to the old woman, as I threw the medicine into the fire-place.—'*Why did you chuck it away?*' she demanded, fixing on me a look that seemed to pierce me through and through: '*I could have made him take it.*'—Now, you know that I am not wanting in presence of mind: but I admit that I grew so confused, I was at a loss what to do; and inventing some excuse—I really forget what—I left the room, not once looking back, for I felt convinced that the old hag was staring after me with her nasty grey eyes."

"I dare say it was all fancy on your part, Poll," said the Beggarman. "The crone's ways were peculiar, p'raps——"

"Well, it might be so," interrupted the young woman: "but I didn't stop to make those reflections at the time. To tell you the truth, I was glad to get away; for I began to think that the nurse would alarm the house, and the landlord might keep me till he could send for a constable. Well, I left the room, as I told you: this was about an hour ago—and as the Mariners' Arms is an early breakfast-house for labourers and colliers employed at the docks and wharfs, the potman was taking down the shutters. There was a light in the bar; and just as I was going out, who should come in to get a morning dram, but Joe Warren?"

"He was up be-times, at all events," observed the Big Beggarman. "Of course he recognised you?"

"To be sure—in a moment," answered Poll; "because he has often seen me decked out in this way. Before I could give him a look to prevent him from speaking to me, he asked what the deuce was going on and insisted on my taking a drop of brandy with him. Then the talkative potman began to inquire of me how the gentleman up-stairs was; and the fellow gabbled away at such a rate that Joe Warren heard quite enough to make it impossible for me to tell him any lies about it. He followed me out; and I thought the best plan was to explain the whole matter to him, just for all the world as if neither you nor me ever meant to keep it a secret. He said he didn't care much about Ramsey's affair, and told me to mind and tell you to put away his share of the five hundred guineas; as everything relating to the Aylesbury bankers was a matter in which he had his claim for *regulars*.* I assured him that you had already done so; and the business was thus made square enough. He then ordered me to have Meagles and Lady Lade set at liberty the instant that I returned; and he said that you needn't trouble yourself about Ramsey—as he'll attend to *him*. He also observed that he intended to make a call this evening in Pall Mall—you know where—and it is very likely you won't see him again till to-morrow night We then parted—and I found the Kinchin-Grand waiting for me at Execution Dock."

"Well—and why the devil should you pretend to be disgusted with the whole affair?" demanded the Big Beggarman. "In my opinion, it's gone off un common well—especially since our friend Joe isn't put out about it, and will undertake to keep Ramsey quiet."

"I am disgusted," said Carrotty Poll, with vixenish acerbity, "because you have made a mull of the thing. You never ought to have played your tricks on Meagles and Lady Lade. One is a devilish good fellow—and the other is a nice woman; and they might have been good friends to us."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" growled the Beggarman.

"Because when you had locked 'em up, it was too late. However," she added, in a milder tone—for she saw that her father was in no humour to be upbraided,—"what's done can't be helped: but I am preciously annoyed at having lost so many hours in such a stupid affair as this expedition to the Mariners' Arms—tired as I was already;—and then that cursed old nurse annoyed me more than enough."

"Well—go and sleep off your ill-humour, Poll," said her father. "I shan't be sorry to get to-bed myself."

The parent and daughter then retired to their chambers;—and during the next three hours a profound silence reigned throughout the Beggar's Staff until the slipshod waiter rose at about nine to open the premises again—for, as it was a Sunday morning, he had snoozed a little later than usual.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS. BRACE AND HER VISITORS.

It was the Sabbath evening; and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her exquisitely-furnished parlour. Some of her young ladies had gone to pass the day with their parents or friends: others had obtained permission to "go to church"—which meant that they had certain little amatory appointments to keep; and a few remained in their own apartment, chatting together or reading novels.

* Fair proportion of the plunder

ing herself in an appealing manner to her mistress, as if beseeching her to propitiate the wrath of the Prince—for she of course knew who the feigned Mr. Harley was;—"O madam! pray pardon me—but such an ill-looking man has just called—and at the Pall Mall entrance too ——"

"An ill-looking man," repeated Mrs. Brace, becoming deadly pale even through the roseate tinge which art had so delicately shed upon her cheeks—so that this woman, handsome to a degree of splendour, grew ghastly to behold.

"Yes, madam," was the servant's rapid and excited answer. "And he says he must and will see you—as he has something particular to tell you about that robbery the other night——But, gracious goodness! he is coming this way——I hear his heavy footsteps approaching!"

"This is awkward—most awkward!" exclaimed the milliner, collecting all her courage to meet the emergency. "Your Royal Highness ——"

"Perdition! I may be known—recognised!" ejaculated the Prince, who had started from his seat at the sound of the advancing steps. "Here! this will be best!" he added;—and in another moment he was concealed behind the ample window-curtain which reached from the ceiling to the floor.

Mrs. Brace would have given worlds that the Prince should not have taken this step: but it was too late—the mischief was accomplished in the twinkling of an eye;—and scarcely had the waving of the curtain subsided, when the Magsman appeared upon the threshold of the apartment. Harriet glided past the intruder with terrified looks, and closed the door behind him; while Mrs. Brace sank back in her chair, a perfect pandemonium raging in her bosom.

Well, indeed, might the lady's-maid have described this formidable visitor as "an ill-looking man;"—for, although it was Sunday, he had not bestowed the slightest pains upon his toilette. His garments were coarse, shabby, and negligent as usual: his coal-black hair was as rough, and his whiskers were as bushy and fierce as ever;—and his eyes gleamed with a sinister expression that was habitual to them, from beneath the coarse, shaggy, overhanging brows. He kept his hat upon his head as he entered the room; and he carried in his hand a huge stick, or rather club, by means of which his powerful arm might have felled an ox at one blow.

For a few moments Mrs. Brace was overwhelmed by his presence. But suddenly a thought struck her; and, starting from her seat, she said in a low and hurried tone, "Follow me into another room—I expect company here every minute."

"Well, then—the company may wait till you and me have done the little business that has brought me here this evening," replied the Magsman. "The place looks so comfortable," he added, taking a calm and deliberate survey of the beautifully-furnished parlour, "that I prefer staying here. Besides, there's a capital fire—and the weather's deuced cold, I can tell you."

Thus speaking, the Magsman took the chair which the Prince had quitted only a few minutes previously; and Mrs. Brace resumed her seat, pushing it back however to a greater distance from the formidable ruffian who had placed himself so near her.

"What! do you think I carry a pestilence about with me?" exclaimed the Magsman, offended at this movement. "But no matter: we won't quarrel about trifles. I dare say I'm not quite so good-looking as when——"

"For heaven's sake! tell me what you require—what you want," interrupted Mrs. Brace, in a tone of feverish excitement.

"Money," responded the villain, with coarse abruptness.

"I sent you five hundred guineas the other day, according to agreement," exclaimed the wretched woman; "and it was an understanding between us that you would trouble me no more."

"Never mind the understanding," said the Magsman. "Half of the blunt went to my pal, the Big Beggarman, who was with me here t'other night—and as I've an unfortunate itch for gambling, I've lost all my share. So I thought I would just drop in this evening, to inquire after your dear health and request a farther supply."

"How much do you require?" gasped Mrs. Brace, in a faint tone—while all the anguish which this interview excited in her soul was betrayed in the workings of her countenance, hard though she struggled to conceal her emotions.

"Another five hundred will answer the purpose—at least for the present," returned the Magsman, with the tone and air of one who felt that he had the power, if not the right, to command.

"For the present!" repeated Mrs. Brace, almost starting from her seat. "Then am I to expect periodical visits from you?" she demanded, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to render firm and even defiant.

"Well—we shall see about all that, my dear," said the Magsman. "You wouldn't surely be so cruel as to refuse your own——"

"Silence!" almost shrieked the wretched woman. "The money shall be sent to you to-morrow," she added, her tone suddenly changing and sinking to a hoarse whisper. "Now you will have the kindness to leave me?"

"What! you don't so much as ask me to wash my mouth out with a drop of something short!" exclaimed the ruffian. "But I see how it is. You look upon me as a low fellow—a vulgarian—the scum of the earth,—while you're a fine lady, pranked out in silks and satins—living in a beautiful house—enjoying every comfort——"

"In the name of God! let us terminate this interview at once," interrupted the milliner, fixing a look of earnest appeal upon her terrible companion. "You can come to-morrow night yourself to fetch the money, if you choose—and then we will have some conversation together. But this evening——"

"You expect company—eh?" said the Magsman. "Well—I don't think I'm exactly in full costume," he added, surveying his ruffian-like attire with a deliberate coolness which left room to believe that he had still some doubts upon the subject. "But really you're not treating me well, my dear: for after so long a separation—it must be a matter of fifteen or sixteen years——"

"Oh! pray—pray leave me now—I beseech—I implore you!" exclaimed the milliner, her voice absolutely expressing a rending agony;—and she joined her white hands appealingly as she thus spoke.

"By jingo! this amounts to a positive insult!" growled the Magsman, not offering to budge from

his chair. "You ought to be precious glad to see me again: but instead of that, you want to get rid of me for the sake of some trumpery folks who're coming to swill tea and coffee and devour muffins. Well, I shan't force my company upon you much longer, as I see it's disagreeable So, if you'll give me a drop of brandy, or anything short that you can lay your hand on at the moment, I'll take myself off."

The reader can imagine the horrified feelings which had raged within the bosom of the elegant milliner from the first moment of the ruffian's entrance,—the bare thought that all his detestable vulgarity and loathsome familiarity were exhibited in the hearing of *the most polished gentleman in Europe*, being quite sufficient to overwhelm and crush her. But, in addition to this, she entertained the appalling dread that he would give utterance to something which might reveal to the ears of the Prince a secret she would sooner die than have betrayed.

It was therefore with an indescribable sensation of relief that she heard him intimate his readiness to depart;—and, springing from her chair with the lightness of a hoyden nymph, she took from a cupboard a silver liqueur-stand, containing crystal decanters filled with spirits and cordials, and surrounded by beautifully cut glasses.

"You haven't got a tumbler handy—have you?" inquired the Magsman, likewise rising from his seat: "for I'm not accustomed to drink thimble-fulls at a time."

The milliner produced a large hock-glass, which the fellow filled to the brim with brandy; and, raising it to his lips, he said, with a leering look at the lady, "Your health—or rayther, my love to you, Fanny—and may you be in a better humour when I favour you with a call next time."

Mrs. Brace reseated herself—for a faintness came over her, as the man called her by her Christian name: but she shook off the oppressive sensation by the time he had finished his fiery draught, which he

poured slowly and without intermission down his throat.

"Well—that's better than the bingo at the Beggar's Staff," he observed, as he placed the glass upon the table: then, surveying the milliner in silence for a few moments, he added, "By goles! you're handsomer than you was sixteen years ago. You've filled out wonderfully, and seem as plump as a partridge. I'll just have one kiss in remembrance of old times—and then I'll be off."

"No—no!" shrieked Mrs. Brace, whose anguish had become intolerably excruciating while the ruffian was thus complimenting her. "Leave me—for God's sake! leave me——you promised you would ——"

"One kiss, I say!" exclaimed the Magsman, advancing towards her with extended arms, his club being for the moment laid on the table.

"I will die sooner!" was the lady's emphatic answer: and, losing all prudential control over herself, she darted an agonising glance towards the curtain.

"By the living jingo! I begin to suspect something now," cried the Magsman, who had not failed to notice that rapid but affrighted look. "A lover, I'll be bound!"

And he strode towards the window.

"Stop!—you dare not do it!—you know not what you are doing!" screamed Mrs. Brace, darting forward and grasping him by the arm.

"Lord bless ye! I ain't jealous——but I must have a look at him, for curiosity's sake," said the Magsman, pushing her back into her seat; and, at the same moment that a stifled shriek came from the lips of the wretched woman, the curtain was drawn violently aside by the ruffian's remorseless hand.

The Prince of Wales, whose countenance was glowing with indignation, thus became revealed to the Magsman; and the fellow was struck dumb and motionless with mingled awe and astonishment—for he instantly recognised the heir-apparent to the throne.

His Royal Highness perceived in a moment that the ruffian knew who he was; and, stepping forward, he pointed imperiously towards the door, exclaiming in a stern voice, "Begone, sir—or it will be the worse for you!"

"No—I'm damned if I'm to be bullied in this way," retorted the Magsman, instantly recovering his self-possession and cool insolence. "The world says your Royal Highness is no better than you should be—and now I've had a proof of it."

For a few moments the Prince was staggered by this unexpected display of defiance: but speedily becoming alive again to the embarrassing nature of his present position, he said, "The coarseness of your allusion is only equalled by its falsity. This lady I respect—and you shall not insult her in my presence. Now, depart quietly—or you will be handed over to the keeping of a constable for endeavouring to extort money from her."

"That's a capital joke, I" exclaimed the Magsman, with a chuckling laugh. "Why—everything she's got, by right belongs to me——"

"Silence!" screamed Mrs. Brace, almost frantic.

"And what's more," added the ruffian, heedless of this interruption; "I'll bring an action against your Royal Highness for *crim. con.* with my wife!"

The milliner shrieked—and fell senseless upon the carpet.

"Miscreant!" ejaculated the Prince, unable to restrain his rage at the last threat levelled against himself: "I'll have you hanged before you're many weeks older."

"No, you won't," responded the man, with a tone and air of insolent defiance: "but you'll send me five hundred guineas to-morrow along with the same sum that my wife has promised me—and on that condition I shall say no more of this business."

Having thus dictated his terms to the heir-apparent, the Magsman grasped his club and strode out of the room, banging the door violently behind him.

The noise aroused Mrs. Brace from her swoon—and his Royal Highness raised her in his arms: then, placing her on a chair, he filled a tumbler with water and made her swallow some of the refreshing beverage.

Not that the Prince cared very much for her: his pride had been terribly wounded by the idea that he had ever intrigued with the wife of such a ruffian as the one who had just quitted the apartment;—but the milliner was too useful to him in many ways and was acquainted with too many of his secrets to permit him to treat her with coolness or indifference—much less with disgust.

"Oh! is not all this a horrible dream?" murmured the wretched woman, as she slowly came to herself: but as the full tide of memory swept back to her excited brain, she raised her eyes in an imploring manner towards the Prince, saying, "What must your Royal Highness think of me now?"

"Just the same as I did before," was the prompt but insincere answer. "You cannot help the degradation into which that vile man is evidently plunged—and I pay a better compliment to your taste than to suppose that when you married him years ago he was anything like what he is at present."

"Oh! I thank you—sincerely thank you for these assurances," said Mrs. Brace, considerably relieved;—and she pressed his hand to her heaving bosom.

"To-morrow you must send him a thousand guineas—mind, a thousand guineas, Fanny," observed the heir-apparent: "that is to say, five hundred for yourself—and five hunded for me. He will then leave you tranquil, no doubt. If not, we must devise some energetic measure to send him out of the country altogether."

"Did he, then, dare to make stipulations with you?" inquired Mrs. Brace, who, it will be remembered, was in a senseless state when the Magsman *ordered* the Prince to send him the money that was to purchase his secrecy and forbearance.

"He did. But we will not dwell upon the subject," hastily observed his Royal Highness, who experienced the keenest sense of mortification at the insult which he had found himself compelled to put up with. "I will send you over a cheque for five hundred guineas in the morning—and you must not fail to remit the thousand to that man before night."

The milliner was about to make some remark, when Harriet entered the room to announce that Miss Clarendon had just arrived, and was waiting for *Mr. Harley* in the apartment to which the lady's-maid had conducted her.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ANOTHER MEETING.

It was not without an emotion of annoyance that Octavia Clarendon had found herself escorted by Harriet to the same room where she had met her lover on the two previous occasions, and from which the bed-chamber opened: for it shocked and pained her to think that the lady of the house and her servant must fancy that she came thither only as the mistress of Mr. Harley, and not in the quality of his destined wife. She dared not however make an observation upon the subject to Harriet: for shame sealed her lips;—but when the domestic had withdrawn, tears started to the long black lashes which shaded the lovely creature's deep blue eyes.

For a few moments she remained pensive and melancholy—more than half repenting of having of her own accord made this appointment. But when she recollected how ardently she had longed to meet her lover again, and that this desire was now on the point of being gratified, a smile played upon her red lips like a sunbeam kissing a rosebud—and she hastily wiped away the traces of her tears.

Scarcely had she thus composed herself, when the door opened—and the next instant she was clasped in the arms of her lover.

"Oh! my sweet Octavia," exclaimed the Prince, pressing her again and again to his bosom, "how truly elysian is the happiness which you have thus affbrded me! Never, since we parted the last time, has your worshipped image been absent from my mind: but now the radiance of your loveliness renews the flood of intense delight which the remembrance of all that glorious beauty has poured into my soul."

"Dearest George—I also have thought of thee without ceasing," murmured Octavia, all her senses appearing to dissolve into softness beneath the melting influence of the insidious language which the melodious yet manly voice of her lover breathed in her ear.

"Yes—my angel," continued the practised and systematic deceiver, having conducted her to a seat, and placing himself by her side,—"I have not for a single moment proved unfaithful to thy sweet image. It has been my contemplation by day—and has rendered my dreams delicious at night. But when thou art not with me, it seems as if a strain of exquisite music had passed away, leaving only the faint prolongation of the dulcet sounds in the ears."

"These assurances create an ineffable joy within my heart," said the enraptured young lady, suffering the Prince, without a remonstrance, to remove her bonnet and ample shawl,—while the very soul of her impassioned love breathed upon him through the words which she uttered, and shone upon him in her heavenly looks and her sunny smiles.

"You cannot conceive the delight which your letter gave me," continued his Royal Highness, whose princely rank was so little suspected by the confiding Octavia. "It is said that Poetry wafts the soul of the bard into an elysian realm of his own creating, where thoughts and images appear as in a celestial temple full of music and incense, and whence his beatific spirit bears them back to the earth to weave them in immortal verse. But, oh! how much more truly may all this be said of Love, which wafts the soul to no ideal world, but into a heaven having a real and palpable existence, and from which there is no awaking to find it all a dream!"

"And shall you ever entertain these thoughts which infuse so much delight into my heart?" murmured Octavia, who could not possibly have understood, even if a saint had risen from the dead to proclaim the fact, that her lover experienced not a particle of the poetic sentiment which he described in such glowing terms, but that his passion was a mere gross sensuousness.

"I shall never cease to adore and worship you, my angel," he replied, straining her to his breast, and lavishing upon her the warmest caresses.

"You are aware that my father has returned—and you will now seek an early opportunity to form his acquaintance?" said Octavia, thus delicately reminding the Prince of all the pledges and vows which he had made her on previous occasions.

"When he shall have become settled in his new abode, dearest," was the specious answer, "I shall obtain an introduction to him. He now stands every chance of shortly becoming heir to the Marchmont peerage."

"Unless some favourable change should take place in respect to the Honourable Mr. Arthur Eaton, who, as I informed you in my letter, is wasting away visibly. Some frightful and unknown malady has fallen upon him," added Octavia, in a tone of deep commiseration.

"And is no cause alleged for this strange indisposition?" inquired the Prince, who was toying with his lovely mistress while thus conversing.

"My father was speaking of the matter again this morning," answered Octavia; "and it appears that some time ago the Honourable Mr. Eaton was supposed to be deeply enamoured of the orphan niece of a rich nobleman: but he suddenly discontinued his visits to her, without any obvious reason. Her noble uncle brought her with him from Derbyshire to London—and since that time the mysterious sickness has stricken the young man. Nevertheless, my father declares that it is not a mental malady—but a physical one: he is not pining away through disappointed hope and blighted affection—but is gradually perishing as if all the elements of existence were sapped and undermined."

"This is most extraordinary," said the Prince, on whose breast Octavia's head lay reclined, while from time to time he imprinted burning kisses upon her brow, her cheeks, and her lips. "But since we are thus discoursing for a moment—and observe, it shall not be for long," he added tenderly,—"upon various and comparatively indifferent matters, let me ask you something more than you have already yet told me relative to those two ladies whose travelling-chariot broke down in front of your house, the very first evening that I was so fortunate—so truly blest as to become acquainted with you. On the last two occasions that we met here, I have been going to speak to you about them: but subjects of a nearer and dearer interest so much absorbed my attention that I lost sight of the matter."

"Do you not remember that my sister and I informed you those ladies were a Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs Smith—and that we fancied they were travelling *incognito*?" said Octavia. "But you yourself declared that they did not deceive us in respect to their names;—and yet my father shares the suspicion

which Pauline and myself originally entertained on that head."

"Ah! then your father is acquainted with the fact of their visit?" observed the Prince.

"Oh! yes—how could we keep such a circumstance concealed from him?" exclaimed Octavia. "Besides, when Mrs. Smith enjoined the strictest secrecy, she did not include my father——"

"The strictest secrecy relative to what, Octavia?" demanded the Prince, his curiosity suddenly excited by the singularity of the observation which had just fallen from the lips of his charming mistress.

"Heavens! what have I been saying?" cried the young lady, absolutely frightened at her want of caution: but her mind had been lulled, by the melting softness of her heart's feelings, into such a dreamy bliss, that she had spoken inadvertently and without reflection.

"Is it possible that you can have a secret which you will keep from *me*?" asked the Prince, assuming a tone tenderly reproachful. "Remember, dearest—you are already my wife in the sight of heaven—and, as such, not a thought nor deed should be concealed from my knowledge. It is not thus that I would act towards you, Octavia."

"Oh! do not upbraid me, George — dearest George!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck and kissing him affectionately, while the tears streamed down her cheeks. "It is not a secret regarding myself—but it may possibly involve the honour of one of those ladies——"

"Such a secret would be safe in my keeping, sweet girl," interrupted the Prince, now experiencing a curiosity so intense and entertaining a suspicion so terrible that he was sorely troubled inwardly, although he concealed his emotions as much as possible.

"I will tell you all—everything," said the yielding Octavia: "but first assure me of your forgiveness for having hitherto maintained so much unnecessary reserve on that point."

"Forgiveness!" he repeated, smoothing down her rich and shining auburn hair with his hand: "how could I be angry with you, even for an instant?"

"Dear George, how kind you are!" she murmured, the tears on her cheeks exhaling with the warmth of the sunny smiles which now succeeded them.

"Proceed, my love," said the Prince, drawing her again towards him, so that her head once more reclined upon his breast: for he did not wish her now to contemplate his features while she spoke—inasmuch as he had a presentiment that he was about to hear something calculated to excite the acutest feelings that could possibly indicate their hidden workings by the expression of the countenance. "You said that this secret might possibly concern the honour of one of those ladies——"

"Yes—if she were not married, interrupted the artless Octavia. "But if Mrs. Mordaunt be the real name, as you said it was, of that beautiful young lady of eighteen—then must she be married, and there is no disgrace. At the same time, the mystery which was observed relative to the child——"

"The child!" repeated the Prince, scarcely able to control his feelings. "But you are speaking, my dearest Octavia, as if I were already acquainted with everything—whereas I know nothing as yet of all this."

"Pardon me for the giddy way in which I began my narrative, dear George," said the lovely girl, pressing his hand to her lips. "I should have told you at once that Mrs. Mordaunt became a mother almost immediately after she entered our house."

"A mother!" murmured the Prince, under his breath: for it was with the greatest difficulty he could now subdue the terrible emotions that were agitating in his bosom. "And what became of the child?" he demanded.

"He was placed in the care of a surgeon named Thurston, and who resides in our neighbourhood," answered Octavia.

"Then it was a boy?" exclaimed the Prince: and, scarcely pausing for an instant, he added, "I suppose the surgeon attended upon my —— Mrs. Mordaunt, I mean, in her confinement?"

"Yes. But am not I doing wrong in communicating all these facts, dearest George?" exclaimed the lovely girl: for she began to perceive that there was something singular in the manner of her companion;—and, raising her head, she gazed upon him with the sweetest expression of her splendid blue eyes. "You tell me that you are acquainted with Mrs. Mordaunt—and you will therefore doubtless meet her in the circle in which you move. Oh! do not bring a blush to her cheeks, if there be really dishonour associated with all I have now revealed to you!"

"You cannot think me so base, my charming Octavia!" said the Prince, straining her to his breast. "It is a mere matter of conversation—perhaps of curiosity on my part: but believe me when I assure you that there is no dishonour attached to Mrs. Mordaunt's name—and I can well divine the family reasons which have compelled her to observe so much mystery in respect to the birth of her child. A runaway and secret match—against the wishes of her parents—and ——"

"Oh! I can understand it now," interrupted Miss Clarendon, placing implicit credence in the specious explanation which the Prince thus volunteered. "Poor creature! she is greatly to be pitied if her parents be so cruel! So beautiful—so amiable—so elegant in her manners——"

"But were you ever to behold her, riding for instance in her carriage, you would not point her out to any one with whom you might happen to be at the time?" said the Prince.

"Assuredly not!" exclaimed the young lady. "Besides, all my thoughts—all my ideas—all my sentiments, are so absorbed in the love which I bear for you, that I have no leisure nor inclination to trouble myself relative to the affairs of others. But you appear to be pre-occupied, George—you are not well: or else something is troubling you?" she added, gazing upon him with the tenderest solicitude.

"Oh! I am always happy when in your society, my beloved girl," he cried, now lavishing upon her the most ardent caresses. "But tell me—how long can you remain with me this evening?—for it is paradise while you are with me—and a dreary void when you are away."

"I must return home by eleven o'clock, without fail," she answered, hiding her blushing countenance on his breast. "Seek not to detain me longer, dear George: for I could not find an excuse to account to my father for a protracted absence."

"Not for worlds would I involve you in so cruel an embarrassment?" exclaimed the Prince, glueing his mouth to her luscious lips, until her heavenly

countenance glowed with the ardour of passion and her melting blue eyes swam in the delicious languor that expressed soft desires.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE EARL AND COUNTESS OF DESBOROUGH.

THE scene now shifts to a noble mansion in Berkeley Square.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the incidents just related; and in a splendidly-furnished apartment, in the lordly dwelling alluded to, a lady was seated—or rather reclining in a negligent manner—upon a sofa drawn near the fire.

She was about twenty-eight years of age, and very handsome. Her complexion was a clear olive: but, beneath that transparent skin of delicately tinged bistre, glowed a fine carnation—the whole effect being that of softness combined with thriving health.

Her eyes were black—large—and brilliant; and, in the proud lustre of their rays, those magnificent orbs denoted the strength of the lady's intellectual powers and the energy of her character—at the same time that they bore testimony to the ardour of her temperament and the warmth of her passions.

Her hair was dark as night—soft as silk—and shining as the glossy plumage of the raven;—and it was parted above a forehead somewhat projecting, but high and spotless. Her eye-brows might have been considered too thick by any one disposed to be hypercritical; and they certainly imparted an air of masculine decision to her countenance. But then they were so well divided—so nobly arched—so admirably semicircular—and so faultlessly pencilled that they were broader in the middle than at the ends.

Her ears were small—well folded—and having a delicate tinge of red;—and nothing could exceed the beauty of the well-shaped neck—long, soft, easy, and flexibly swan-like. Her bust was of the most exquisite proportions: neither too much elevated, nor too much depressed,—and with the bosoms rising gently into moderate contours—firm and distinctly separated. She was tall in stature: her figure was slender and with softly flowing outlines unequalled for graceful symmetry;—and there was about her an air of elegance, entirely her own, and totally apart from the splendour by which she was surrounded.

She was dressed in a charming *deshabillée*. A tasteful cap set off with its snowy whiteness the raven blackness of her hair;—a pale silk wrapper, open at the breast and trimmed with the finest lace, was gathered negligently round her form, the shape of which it rather developed than concealed;—and the small, shapely feet, thrust into satin slippers, peeped forth from beneath the flowing drapery.

This lady was Eleanor, Countess of Desborough;—and her husband, the Earl, was a fine handsome man, in his fortieth year.

Nevertheless, she had not married him from love. She had been sacrificed to him on account of his enormous wealth: for he was one of the largest of those few favoured thousands who, by an atrocious system, retained in their possession the entire soil of England. Possessed of vast estates in Hertfordshire and Derbyshire, and a princely mansion in each of those counties—having likewise a perfect palatial residence in Berkeley Square—and owning entire streets in the metropolis, in addition to being an extensive fundholder, the Earl of Desborough might have been well deemed an excellent match by avaricious, selfish, and interested parents. But he had long remained unmarried, to the wonder of all his friends and the annoyance of mammas who had grown-up daughters and who marvelled when he *would* make his selection. At length, after having passed the best years of his life in "single blessedness," he was smitten with the charms of Lady Eleanor Sefton. This was about six years previously to the date at which our tale opened;—and her ladyship was at that time attached to the person of the Princess Sophia—then a young girl of only twelve. The Earl proposed to Lady Eleanor, whose affections were certainly disengaged, but who felt that she could not love him. Her parents, however—being more proud than wealthy—compelled her to accompany him to the altar;—and thus, at the age of two-and-twenty the charming brunette, full of all the ardent fires of a glowing temperament and a vigorous youthfulness, was sacrificed to a man for whom she entertained not the slightest particle of affection. Six years had passed since this union, which was unblest by offspring;—and although to the world the noble pair appeared contented and happy in their marriage-state, yet their private life seemed to tell another and far different tale. For they occupied not the same sleeping-apartment; and the domestics in their service were wont to whisper to their friends, in gossiping moods, that the Earl and Countess had never slept together since the first month of their alliance.

We should here observe, ere we resume the thread of our narrative, that the Earl of Desborough had adopted and brought up an orphan niece. This young lady was, at the period of which we are writing, in her eighteenth year; and she was as remarkable for the beauty of her person as for the masculine energy of her character—ungovernable passions—impetuous disposition—and vindictive nature. But she was not now an inmate of the mansion in Berkeley Square: neither was she at either of her uncle's country seats in Derbyshire or Hertfordshire. It was reported that the Hon. Miss Fernanda Aylmer—for that was her name—had accompanied some of her noble relative's friends on a tour in Italy;—and this story was generally believed, inasmuch as it was supposed that her mind required change of scene on account of a disappointment in love which rumour alleged her to have experienced. Whether the facts really were as currently stated, will presently appear: in the meantime, we return to the Countess of Desborough.

It was, as we observed at the opening of this chapter, about two o'clock in the afternoon;—and her ladyship was reclining in a negligent manner upon the sofa. A book, which she had been reading, lay near her: and the heading of the open pages showed that it was not one of the flimsy novels of the day—nor one of the licentious Magazines then so much in vogue,—but a work of ster-

ling merit and value, the study of which indicated the taste and mental capacity of the Countess.

She had only returned from Hertfordshire, in company with her husband, the evening before;—and, being wearied with travelling, she had risen later than usual. Thus was it that, although the hour had already arrived when visitors might be expected, she was still in her elegant *negligée*, and indeed experienced that lassitude which subdued all inclination to go through the tedious ceremony of the toilette.

The time-piece on the mantel had struck two, when the door slowly opened—and the Earl of Desborough entered the room.

We have already said that he was a fine, handsome person: we may add that his demeanour was pleasant—his conversation agreeable—and his manners affable and gracious. Even to those whom he looked upon as his inferiors, he exhibited not the pride and hauteur which usually characterise the English aristocracy: but he possessed a calm dignity, which circumstances might subdue into an air of conciliation and encouragement calculated to relieve the diffident of all awkwardness or embarrassment in his presence. In politics he was as liberal as a peer dared be in those times or as a British nobleman ever possibly could be;—and a naturally generous disposition rendered him charitable and bounteous towards those who made their sufferings known to him. Altogether, he was a man whom, to outward appearances, Eleanor might have tutored her heart to love;—and, judging in the same superficial way, such an alliance seemed fully and completely adapted to ensure her happiness.

But it was not so:—and a cold, imperceptible tremor swept over her frame the instant that the Earl appeared upon the threshold of the apartment.

"Pardon me if I intrude, Eleanor," he said, in a somewhat mournful voice, and speaking in a tone of embarrassment—not with the frank and noble confidence of a husband: "I inquired if you were alone before I ventured thus to break upon your privacy."

"Has not your lordship the *right* to visit me at your own good pleasure?" asked the Countess, in a cold tone and with a marked emphasis upon the word printed in italics.

"Oh! the *right*—wherefore do you speak to me with such bitter—painfully significant sarcasm?" exclaimed the Earl, closing the door and advancing towards her. "Do you not think, Eleanor, that my own thoughts—my own reflections are a sufficient punishment to me for having been wicked and insane enough to link you to the side of a corpse?" he added, in a tone of ineffable anguish.

"My God! talk not to me thus, my lord!" interrupted the Countess, with a shudder that was now painfully visible: and for a moment she turned deadly pale—then the warm blood rushed to her cheeks as if she were ashamed at her own conduct. "Pray sit down, Francis," she said, forcing herself to assume a milder tone, and addressing her husband by his Christian name.

"Merciful heavens! what would I give to purchase an unvaried continuation of this kindness of manner which you have just shown towards me!" he said, evidently touched to his very heart's core even by that faint scintillation of a better feeling on the part of the woman whom he worshipped—whom he loved so madly!

"And would to God that I could always exercise a sufficient control over myself, to enable me to treat you with that kindness which you seek to deserve at my hands," exclaimed Eleanor, gazing on him with a profound commiseration. "Oh! I am ungrateful—very ungrateful, Francis: I know that I am!" she continued, carried away by the sudden enthusiasm with which a sense of duty had inspired her. "You surround me with all the elements of happiness—my slightest wish is anticipated—my very path is paved with gold—and my relatives have been enriched by your bounty:—and yet I am cold—reserved—cruel towards you, Francis—and you bear it all without a murmur? Oh! forgive me, my husband—forgive me!" she cried, throwing herself on her knees at his feet, and joining her white hands imploringly: "forgive me, I say—and in future I will endeavour to prove grateful and kind, as you yourself are generous and good!"

The Earl started from the seat which he had taken, and for a few moments was so bewildered and amazed by this proceeding on the part of his wife that he knew not how to act—nor what to say. His fine, tall, manly form, of noble proportions and commanding air, was drawn up to its full height;—and his large handsome blue eyes were bent upon the beauteous woman who thus knelt before him as a weeping suppliant. For the tears were streaming down her cheeks—and her red lips, parted with the beseeching expression which her countenance had assumed, revealed the faultless teeth, white as the pearls of the east. He beheld, too, the polished and exquisitively shaped arms, thrust forth from the large sleeves of the negligent wrapper,—the hands uniting insensibly with those arms as in the statue of the Venus de Medici. Yes—thus might his looks embrace the charms of his lovely wife:—but, although at length he recovered self-possession enough to raise her from her knees, he embraced her not—neither did he even offer so much as to touch her forehead with his lips.

"Say—will you pardon me, Francis?" she exclaimed, sinking back upon the sofa.

"Just heaven! it is for me to implore *your* forgiveness, Eleanor!" he said, his countenance expressing all the agony that rent his soul.

"No—it is for me!" she responded emphatically. "I have been unkind—ungenerous towards you: but, believe me, I have never failed to appreciate all that is good and great in your disposition—all that is noble and elevated in your character. Heaven knows that I have reasoned with myself so often—Oh! so often, that I wonder how I have not yet succeeded in tutoring my mind to the entertainment of other thoughts—other ideas—other sentiments towards you. But you cannot put faith in what I now tell you—you cannot understand the sincerity of my sorrow and remorse—you remember that the present scene is but a repetition of many former ones—and you look upon me as capricious, changeable and vacillating! Yes—yes—such are your impressions, Francis—and you are justified in thinking thus of me!"

As these last words fell from the lips of the Countess, she covered her face with her hands—and the pearly tears trickled between her long taper fingers.

There was a pause—a silence in that room;—and then a sob—a half-stifled sob—came floating upon the lady's ear.

She started—raised her head—and looked rapidly towards her husband. He had reseated himself: both his elbows rested upon the table—and his hands supported his face, which they likewise concealed. He was evidently wrestling against emotions profoundly excited—but vainly wrestling: for his chest heaved convulsively—and the strong, powerful, vigorous man was weeping like a child.

Oh! not for another instant could the naturally generous-hearted Eleanor brook this moving spectacle: but, springing towards him, she tore his hands away from his countenance—she raised his head—and pressing her lips to his forehead, while the tears rained down from her long dark lashes upon his cheeks, she murmured, "Forgive me, Francis—forgive me! I am a wretch to have tortured you thus!"

"It was your kindness—your goodness which unmanned me, adorable woman!" he exclaimed, pressing her in his arms: "it was the mercy you showed towards me, that awakened all the tenderest feelings of my soul!"

He remained seated—and his beautiful wife stood by his side, leaning upon him with one arm thrown around his neck, and one hand pressing his own to her lips,—while her eyes, usually of such dazzling lustre, contemplated his handsome features with a melting softness and a mournful tenderness.

"Never again ask me to forgive you, Eleanor," said the nobleman: "for I have so much for which to implore *your* pardon! But you can form no idea of the extent of that love which I bear for you, and which rendered me so diabolically selfish as to seal your misery by making you mine. Never—never shall I forget the first time that I beheld you! An enchantment was upon me—the very atmosphere which you breathed was intoxicating—the air through which you seemed to float in the mazy dance was fraught with ravishment! My senses were enthralled—my spirit was bathed in a fount of love. I went home—and then came the terrible reflection that you never could be mine,—although the sweetest reminiscences of my life would ever be associated with your image. Like Orpheus, I could cherish the memory and in imagination look upon the shade of her whom I loved: but the deep and impassable gulf appeared to be still between us! Again I saw you—and we were introduced to each other. Then did I comprehend all that celestial passion which poets love to paint,—I felt all its mystic influence, thrilling me like an elysian essence,—and I sate like one enchanted by your side, gazing in respectful admiration upon you. You spoke—and your voice fell like soft music on my ear;—and when some one came to lead you off to the dance, it seemed to me as if a delicious melody which had enchained my senses, were passing away. Again I went home—to ponder throughout the live-long night on your image. And then I was madman enough to think and to hope that there might be such a sentiment as a love of divine nature, apart from gross enjoyment, and existing rather as an essence than a sensuousness. And I fancied that if I made you my wife—surrounded you with every element of happiness which wealth could purchase—anticipated all your slightest wishes—ministered unto you the most delicate yet unwearied attentions—converted you into the goddess of my incessant worship—elevated you as the divinity to which it would be my only joy and desire to kneel—and studied your felicity even to those minute details that embrace the veriest trifles which the most affectionate husbands are prone to overlook,—I flattered myself, I say, that if I did all this, you would appreciate my good intentions—you would become contented with your lot and you would regard me with a generous compassion—if not with friendship! Your *love* I could not hope to gain:—and yet there were moments when the starry wings of my imagination wafted me, in delicious visions, away from this gross earth, and taught me to believe that a young, amiable, and intellectual woman, placed in the midst of the glowing feelings and gentle fascinations which my idolatry towards her was calculated to engender, would have perhaps learnt even to *love* the man who thus undertook to make her welfare and her happiness his sole and constant care."

By degrees, as the Earl of Desborough gave utterance to these sentiments in a tone plaintively touching, the Countess grew deeply—deeply interested in the language that thus conveyed such ingenuous revelations: her whole attention became absorbed in words which, though spoken with no sinister intent, but in the spirit of manly frankness and candour had the effect of a powerful appeal to her feelings;—and when, towards the close, they assumed the air and expression of a gentle reproach and a tender upbraiding, the conviction gradually stole upon her that she was unworthy of even the notice of the man in whose mind dwelt such elevated thoughts and such chastening ideas. The tint of the rose re-appeared upon her cheeks which the former emotions had left so pale;—and that hue, deepening rapidly as the sense of shame grew stronger in her breast, flushed into a glowing crimson which overspread her countenance—her neck—her very bosom!

"Francis," she said, in a low and solemn voice, as she bent over him in such a way that he could not see her blushing cheeks, although he felt the gentle pressure of her warm arm round his neck,—"I am humiliated—ashamed—confused, to an extent which you cannot possibly understand. What can I say—what can I do to convince you that I am thus profoundly touched? You have made me comprehend all the grossness of my mortal nature:—you have forced me to regard and study my own imagination in all its impurity—my soul in all its sensuousness. And yet—though possessing an ardent temperament, and at times devoured by desires and rendered restless by fierce passions—I take the Almighty to witness that I am pure and chaste in body,—I call heaven to hear the solemn oath which I pledge to you that never, never have I proved faithless to the vows breathed by my lips at the altar."

"Hush! not a word more, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor!" cried the Earl, springing from his chair and straining her to his breast. "It were a flagrant insult towards you, were I even to thank you for an assurance on a point regarding which I was already assured. Never—no, not for a single instant—have I suspected that the rich offering of your virgin affections has been surrendered to another;—and it is the conviction of your chastity which enhances into a worship—an idolatry the love that I bear you! Oh!—yes—it is for this that I have made you the goddess of my adoration;—and when I am not in your presence, my thoughts are with you all the same. Your image is never absent from my me-

mory;—but when I think of that wilful, wicked selfishness on my part—or rather, those vain and fanciful imaginings—which prompted me to make you my *victim*, my very soul is wrung with the agony and crucifixion of remorse! Oh! my beloved—my adored Eleanor, grant me your compassion—your sympathy—your commiseration. Despise me not—suffer not your heart to loathe and abhor me; and when the sense of your own unhappiness steals irresistibly upon you—when, in gazing around, you behold wives who can be proud of their husbands and rejoice in a smiling progeny,—then curse me not in the depths of your sickening spirit,—but pause for a moment to reflect that I also am unhappy!"

The Earl had spoken to this length without interruption—for the Countess was almost suffocated by the feelings which his pathetic and touching language inspired. Her head sank upon his shoulder: he felt her bosom throbbing against his arm like the swell and reflux of a mighty tide;—and her tears rained down upon his vesture.

But this evidence of a warm and generous disposition on her part, only rendered his remorse the more poignant,—crushing his very soul as beneath the weight of centuries: for more vividly than ever was forced upon his mind the conviction that his selfishness or his sophistry had demanded and obtained the sacrifice of a lovely woman animated with all the ecstatic fires of youth, sensitive to the seductions of an ardent temperament, and yet able from a sense of duty to subdue the longings of her impassioned nature and the cravings of her glowing imagination.

Thus, while his heart cherished a very paradise of love for this adorable being, his brain was convulsed with ever-recurring paroxysms of sorrow and remorse;—and while the new-born tenderness which she now manifested towards him thrilled in transport through his veins, he shuddered because he feared lest it should have kindled suddenly only to expire rapidly.

"Francis—my good, kind husband," murmured the soft, melting voice of the Countess in his ear,—"will you not believe me when I assure you that our conversation of this day has changed me altogether?—will you not suffer yourself to hope that I can henceforth behave to you in a manner which may become at least a slight atonement for the past? I am well aware that I have made these promises before—that your language has on many, many occasions melted me into a softness which has led to similar vows and pledges. But never was the impression so deep as it is now—never did I comprehend your character so fully as I can read it at present."

"I could fall on my knees and worship you for these assurances, Eleanor!" exclaimed the Earl, yielding to the tide of delight on which his soul was now borne along. "Oh! then the flowers of my fancy are not dead—and the hopes which I had formed may yet be realized. You will love me as if I were a dear parent—a brother—or a friend;—and I shall continue to worship you as my goddess—as the idol of my devotion."

And, drawing her upon his breast, the Earl imprinted kisses on her brow—her cheeks—and her lips:—but those kisses were as chaste and pure as sisters bestow on each other,—gentle caresses, and not the long, ardent, and impassioned enjoyments of love kindling with desire. Nevertheless the lady, unable to restrain the natural ardour of her temperament, clung fervently to him, with her arms embracing his neck tenaciously—almost violently. But, gently disengaging himself from her embrace, he with difficulty subdued the profound sigh that rose from his very heart's core; while Eleanor resuming her seat on the sofa, blushed through shame at the evidence of an indomitable sensuality into which her passion had betrayed her.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HONOURABLE ARTHUR EATON.

There was a long pause, during which the Earl and Countess struggled to subdue the various emotions which animated them;—and at length the former said, "It was relative to my unhappy niece, dear Eleanor, that I came to seek an interview with you this afternoon."

"Have you heard any unpleasant tidings concerning her?" inquired the Countess, in a tone which expressed the interest she took in the young lady alluded to.

"No: reassure yourself on that point," answered the Earl of Desborough: "and again, and again, let me thank you for the tender solicitude which you have ever manifested in her behalf."

"You love her as if she were your own child," observed Eleanor; "and when I became your wife, I adopted her as such."

"And had she followed your counsel and example, she would never have brought dishonour on herself," added the Earl, emphatically. "Oh! when I think of the necessity—the terrible necessity—which has compelled us to place the young girl in such a hateful—detestable retirement, it is enough to drive me to despair. But the intelligence which I have now to impart to you, Eleanor, is somewhat of a cheering nature."

"Delay not, then, to communicate such welcome tidings," exclaimed the Countess.

"I have this morning received a letter from the Honourable Arthur Eaton," continued the Earl. "It appears that, accompanied by his father, he arrived in town last evening; and he has written to me to implore an interview this afternoon. I have accorded his request—and in half-an-hour he will be here," added the nobleman, referring to his watch.

"But for what purpose can the unprincipled young man have solicited this interview?" asked the Countess, amazed by the intelligence.

"This letter briefly explains the motive," responded the Earl. "Feeling the very foundations of his existence breaking up, and conscious that some unknown but terrible malady is hurrying him to the tomb, he has been stricken with remorse—and he proposes to render his victim an act of justice which will at least prove his contrition and enable Fernanda to return into society without the blush of conscious shame upon her cheeks."

"This intelligence would be indeed welcome," exclaimed the Countess, "were I convinced that Fernanda possesses a disposition of a nature calculated to admit of such a compromise. For I need scarcely remind you that she is a being who can pursue no middle course: all her passions and sentiments verge into extremes. Madly has she loved Arthur Eaton once—profoundly does she hate him

now. A few months back, and she would have died to save him from even the slightest pang: but when the fatal conviction burst upon her that she was betrayed by a faithless seducer, she vowed that she would devote herself to a deadly vengeance."

"It must be for you to reason with her, Eleanor," observed the nobleman. "In a few minutes Mr. Eaton will be here—and in the evening, if you can make it convenient, you might pay a visit as privately and secretly as possible to my unhappy niece."

"Nothing shall prevent me," answered the Countess. "But you must now excuse me for a few minutes, while I make some change in my toilette—as I cannot receive Mr. Eaton in this *deshabillée*."

The lady quitted the room: and in about a quarter of an hour she returned, dressed in an elegant manner. If she were charming in her negligent attire, she was now superbly handsome in the dark velvet dress which she wore. Her hair, previously arranged in massive bands, now fell in locks of raven brightness upon her naked shoulders; and instead of the negligent morning cap, pearls as beautiful and as costly as those of Cleopatra encircled her polished brow. The exquisite grace of her form—the statuesque carriage of the arching neck and well-proportioned bust—the elegance of her movements—and the mild, though dignified expression which animated her features,—all combined to render her a being of whom an adoring husband might well be proud.

Scarcely had the Countess of Desborough resumed her seat on the sofa, when a domestic, attired in a sumptuous livery,—that disgusting trumpery which degrades the man into the menial, and which, thank God! the noble-minded Americans have cast off from amongst them,—threw open the door of the apartment, and announced the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

The only son of Lord Marchmont was, as we have

already stated, about three-and-twenty years of age. He was tall, and naturally slender—but now so thin that there was something spectral in his appearance. His hair was dark and curly: his eyes, of a corresponding hue, were large and searching—fascinating the beholder with their extraordinary brilliancy. But it was the light of fever that shone thus superhumanly in them;—and when observed in contrast with the emaciated and colourless cheeks—the thin lips, the natural richness of whose red had been subdued into a faint rose-tint—and the general appearance of sickness, attenuation, and decay which marked the unfortunate young man,—the effect produced was shocking in the extreme.

Retaining the air of youthfulness, he seemed to have entered suddenly on the term of caducity without having passed his prime, and likewise without falling into decrepitude. He still walked upright: there was not a wrinkle upon his brow—not a streak of snow on his dark and silky hair;—nor was there a speck to mar the brilliancy of his eyes and perfect teeth. And yet he was wasting away—gliding onward to the tomb with a rapidity that might almost be seen!

The Earl and Countess of Desborough rose and received the visitor with a reserve the coldness of which was less intense than they meant it to be: for grievous as was the wrong which he had inflicted upon Fernanda Aylmer, they could not help being touched by the change—the awful change—which had taken place in Arthur Eaton since last they saw him!

A few months ago, and he was a fine, handsome young man — vigorous in the enjoyment of that spring-time of his existence when the sanguine imagination, elate with hope, decks out the world in all its brightest hues, and fancies that Time, in its onward flight, will never fail to scatter flowers from his brow and diamonds from his wing.

But now—Oh! now—what a spectral being was that to bask in the sunshine of aristocratic grandeur—to breathe the ambrosial air of a lordly mansion—or to sit down at the banquet where the rosate floods of luxury were poured forth. Already did he seem as if about to take the one short step which separated his feet from the verge of the grave: already did he appear as if on the point of seeking a refuge in the tomb—that silent shore on which the last wave of human life flows, never to ebb again!

Mr. Eaton sank upon a chair even before he was invited to be seated—for the mere exertion of ascending from his carriage in the street to that apartment on the first-floor, had been followed by a general lassitude and weakness throughout the entire frame, so that he felt as if his back were about to break and his limbs to snap asunder beneath him.

"I know not how to find words to express my gratitude for the goodness which has prompted your lordship to grant me this interview," began the young invalid, speaking in a low and faint, but not disagreeable voice;—"and the presence of her ladyship at the same time is an additional encouragement——But tell me of my poor wronged Fernanda," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, and speaking with some degree of excitement.

"The subject is a most painful one, Mr. Eaton," said the Earl;—"and yet, considering the object of your visit, it is necessary to enter into full particulars. Fernanda has been residing for some weeks past in the strictest retirement. Within the last three days she gave birth to a still-born child. The evidence of her shame is not therefore in existence!"

"It would be a wretched affectation on my part," observed Mr. Eaton, "were I to express any sorrow at this result. But, tell me, my lord—or you, my lady—tell me whether Fernanda will accept the tardy reparation which I propose to make her."

"I fear that it will be no easy task to persuade her to accept your hand," replied the Countess;—"and, since you have appealed to me, it would be alike wrong and foolish not to enumerate all the difficulties which are to be encountered in carrying out your design. Profound and sincere as was Fernanda's love for you,—deep and fervent as it must have been to enable you to triumph over her virtue,—it nevertheless survives no longer."

"And she hates me—she hates me!" exclaimed Arthur, a hectic-tinge appearing, faint and evanescent, upon his cheeks. "Oh! yes—your ladyship need not attempt to conceal the full truth from me—for I am well acquainted with Fernanda's disposition—I can imagine every phase of her character! Ardently as she has loved—with equal bitterness can she hate;—in the same way that she would surrender her life to prove her affection—so would she make any sacrifice to wreak her revenge. You see that I understand her well;—and I know that I have wronged her—cruelly wronged her. But, as God is my judge, I loved her in the beginning as fervently as she loved me—and she became the victim to no settled scheme of seduction. My crime was not premeditated: in the ardour of an impassioned moment I became too bold, and she too weak—and her dishonour was the result. And it was not altogether because I had thus experienced the rights of a husband without having bestowed on her the title of a wife,—it was not on this account alone that I began to repent of my vows and pledges; but it was also because her imperious disposition would brook no control—because, in her changing humours, she sought to render me the victim of her caprices—and because her jealousy and suspicion knew no bounds."

The Honourable Mr. Eaton paused to gather breath: for the animation with which he spoke had exhausted him.

"I will frankly and honestly confess," he resumed at length, "that were I still in the full vigour of youthful health, I should not perhaps have sought to make amends to Fernanda for the injury I have inflicted upon her. I do not believe that we were formed for each other: the more our respective thoughts, feelings, habits, and passions were displayed and developed to each other, the greater appeared the dissimilitude between our minds—the more marked grew the unfitness of our union. But now," he continued, in a tone of deep pathos,—"now that the tide of my existence is so rapidly ebbing away, bearing on its bosom all the relics of a youthfulness so early wrecked—the shattered remnants of my affections, my hopes, and my aspirations,—now, in a word, that my footsteps are carrying me with such frightful speed to an early grave, there is scarcely merit on my part in making any sacrifice for Fernanda's sake,—whereas, on her side, it would be insane were she to refuse the honourable title of a wife. Alas! she would soon become a widow—and then, without shame, could she in due time bestow her hand on some happier object of her affections."

"It certainly is not our wish to reproach you for the past, Arthur," said the Earl of Desborough, much

affected by the young man's language—while the Countess sought not to restrain nor to conceal her tears;—"and your present conduct," added the nobleman, "deserves our commendation—yes, even our gratitude. Believe me, therefore, that nothing shall be omitted by Lady Desborough or myself—nothing left unessayed—in order to induce Fernanda to perform that which now becomes a duty."

"And if persuasion be required to move her, my lord," said Arthur, "think you that if I were to present myself to her in the retirement where she has been placed—exhibit to her the wretched, wasted being that I am—bid her gaze upon my colourless cheeks and my fire-severed eyes,—oh! if I were to do this—and even fall upon my knees before her, demanding that pardon which a man upon his death-bed has a right to entreat and expect at the hands of even his bitterest enemy,—were I to do all this, she never could refuse to grant my prayer and suffer me to lead her to the altar."

The Countess exchanged a rapid glance with her husband, whose look conveyed an affirmative sympathetically responsive to her own thoughts; and, turning towards the Hon. Mr. Eaton, she said, "This evening at eight o'clock you shall accompany me to the place where Fernanda is residing. But as the visit must be strictly private, and it would be as inconvenient for me to go with you in your carriage as for you to occupy a seat in mine,—in a word, as this proceeding on our part must not be known to any of our dependants,—I will proceed with the Earl at seven o'clock to make a call at St. James's Palace—and at eight we will meet you, Mr. Eaton, in Pall Mall. You will have a hackney-coach in attendance; and I will then accompany you to Fernanda's present abode."

The Earl signified his approval of this project;—and Mr. Eaton took a temporary leave of the noble pair.

CHAPTER XI.

ELEANOR AND THE PRINCE.

HALF-AN-HOUR had elapsed since the departure of Lord Marchmont's afflicted son—and the Countess of Desborough was now once more alone, her husband having left her until dinner-time.

Reclining upon the sofa, Eleanor gave way to the reflections which the main incident of the afternoon had excited within her:—we allude to that singular and painful interview which she had with the Earl.

She revolved in her mind everything he had said to her: she repeated to herself, as nearly as she could recollect, all the glowing words in which he had described his love—the pathetic terms in which he had depicted his remorse—and the noble language which he had uttered in drawing a distinction between an etherial and æsthetic sentiment on the one hand, and a gross, sensual passion on the other. But her meditations brought her at length to the termination of the whole scene,—when he imprinted chaste kisses on her lips, and when she felt as if lightning circulated in her veins, so powerful were the longings of her desires.

Again did those sensations steal upon her;—and she blushed, although alone, at the sway which her ardent temperament exercised over her. She was ashamed and humiliated at the idea of being unable to wrestle against the voluptuous cravings that caused her bosom to pant, and her cheeks to glow, and her pulse to thrill. Invoking the aid of her virtue against the promptings of her nature—striving to assist the intellectual and spiritual to assert their triumph over the gross and the material—arming herself with all the pride and dignity of her sex to combat against that sex's mysterious longings,—the noble lady's very soul was rent with conflicting emotions; and the struggle irresistibly led her on into repinings against the destiny which thus made her the victim of so fierce a conflict between the spirit and the flesh.

It was at the moment when the heightened colour of her cheeks—the subdued lustre of her magnificent eyes, now swimming in a soft languor—and the rapid heavings of her bosom, gave an indescribable charm to her entire appearance, that the door of the apartment was thrown open, and the lace-bedizened domestic announced his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

Composing herself as well as she was able, the Countess of Desborough advanced to meet the heir-apparent, who, after the usual compliments, handed her back to the sofa whence she had risen, and took a seat by her side.

"There is no chance, I hope, of interruption on the part of the Earl?" said the Prince: then, instantly perceiving that the observation had excited the surprise of the Countess, he hastened to add, "Because I wish to speak to your ladyship on a subject of no ordinary importance."

"The Earl will not return until six o'clock," answered Eleanor; "and it is now half-past four," she remarked, glancing at the time-piece on the mantel.

"Your ladyship is doubtless astonished at the announcement I have already made, respecting the importance of the matter which has brought me hither this afternoon," continued the Prince, scarcely knowing how to open the subject that was uppermost in his mind. "But I am sure—I feel convinced," he exclaimed, with some degree of abruptness, "that your ladyship will meet my inquiries with candour and frankness."

Had not the Countess been conscious of one incident which by its importance afforded a clue to the meaning of the Prince's allusion, she might have thought that his Royal Highness was about to address her in the language of love: but there was a certain excitement in his voice as well as an embarrassment in his manner that engendered in her bosom the worst fears on behalf of a lady to whom she was deeply attached.

"It is consistent with my nature and also with my duty to behave frankly towards your Royal Highness," she observed, after a few moments' reflection.

"You already divine the object of my visit?" exclaimed the Prince: then, glancing hastily around the apartment, he said in a more subdued tone, "Is it possible that our discourse may be overheard?"

"Not the slightest apprehension need be entertained on that head," was the immediate response given by the Countess.

"Your ladyship is the depositress of a secret—a terrible secret—involving the honour of one of the Royal Family of England," resumed the Prince of

Wales, fixing a searching look upon Eleanor's countenance, from which all the colour immediately fled.

"Does not your Royal Highness think that it were better to leave such a secret in the oblivion where prudence has sought to bury it?" she asked, in a low and tremulous tone: for she saw that it was useless to attempt a denial of the circumstance to which he alluded.

"Think you that I am anxious to publish my own sister's shame?" he demanded, in a voice which showed how deeply his pride was wounded and how humiliated he felt on account of the dishonour that had fallen on a relative so near to him. "No—such is not my intention: but I am desirous to learn all the circumstances connected with this most distressing incident."

"It were useless to probe those circumstances now—since all possible precautions have been adopted to cover them with an impervious veil," said the Countess of Desborough.

"And yet your ladyship perceives that, in spite of these precautions, a whisper has reached my ears, conveying to me the startling intelligence of the dishonour of my sister."

There was a mixture of irony and vexation in the tone and manner of the Prince which struck the Countess with the truth and justice of his observation. For, notwithstanding all the measures which prudence had suggested and which the command of unlimited resources had enabled her to carry into execution, her royal friend's secret *had* indeed transpired by some mysterious and at present unaccountable means.

"Let me convince you," resumed the heir-apparent, "that I am better acquainted with the outline of this unfortunate occurrence than your ladyship imagines. A carriage breaks down late one evening in the Edgeware Road—the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough take refuge in a neighbouring dwelling. The Princess adopted the name of *Mrs. Mordaunt*—the Countess of Desborough assumes that of *Mrs. Smith*."

"Is it possible that those young ladies could have discovered whom we were?" exclaimed Eleanor, her thoughts and her suspicions instantly settling upon Octavia and Pauline Clarendon: "can they have been base enough to make the circumstance a subject for vulgar scandal and detestable gossip? If this be the case, never more shall I believe that the countenance is an index of the mind: for candour, sincerity, and artlessness were stamped upon the features of those girls!"

"Blame them not—do them not so much injustice!" said the Prince of Wales. "Being altogether unacquainted with them, except by name, it is not from their lips that the whispers have reached me; and I can likewise assert, upon the same good authority whence I *did* receive the astounding and distressing intelligence, that those young ladies have religiously kept the secret of which accident rendered them the depositresses."

"The surgeon—Mr. Thurston—could *he* have betrayed the unhappy Princess?" murmured the Countess in a musing tone.

"No—Mr. Thurston merits not your blame," observed his Royal Highness. "Indeed, I am tolerably well assured that neither he nor the young ladies have ever entertained the slightest suspicion who Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith really were. I shall not tell your ladyship how I became acquainted with the circumstance which we are discussing: suffice it to say that my informant is as trustworthy as yourself——"

"Something strikes me!" ejaculated the Countess suddenly. "When the travelling-barouche broke down, a man—perhaps a gentleman—assisted the Princess's lady's-maid to alight, and then opened the door to aid us to descend. But he disappeared abruptly—and in the confusion of that moment, as well as in the excitement of the subsequent occurrences, all recollection of his evanescent presence was completely absorbed. It was that individual, then, who was your Royal Highness's informant," added Eleanor, with a marked emphasis.

"I will not deny the fact—since you have thus cleverly divined the truth," said the Prince: "but that person will never divulge the secret to another."

"And yet he could not have informed your Royal Highness of everything," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough: "because, although he might have recognised the Princess and me in the carriage, it was impossible for him to perceive the situation in which my beloved companion so unfortunately found herself."

"He remained in the neighbourhood and kept a strict watch all night long," said the Prince, determined to avert suspicion from Octavia relative to the authorship of the information he had received. "He saw the surgeon sent for—he knew that a child was born during the night—and as he was well aware that your ladyship could have no motive in concealing the birth of an infant of your own, he naturally concluded that it was my unhappy sister who——"

"Enough!" exclaimed the Countess, imperiously "I again declare that I can discover no advantage in discussing this most painful subject. Your Royal Highness admits the secret to be safe in all quarters: let me therefore implore you not to disinter it from so desirable an oblivion. I love the Princess Sophia as if she were my own sister—I enjoy her confidence—and I have done my duty. Surely your Royal Highness has not come hither to upbraid me for the part which I enacted throughout that trying scene?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the Prince. "On the contrary, my deepest gratitude is due to your ladyship."

"In this case, your Royal Highness will grant me the boon I am about to solicit?" observed Eleanor, hastily.

"Speak!" said the heir-apparent, his eyes now dwelling with admiration upon the countenance to which excitement had brought back all the glowing hues of health and beauty.

"My prayer is that your Royal Highness will not reveal to the Princess Sophia your knowledge of her secret," answered the Countess. "Oh! she would die through shame were she even to harbour a suspicion that her weakness—or rather, her unfortunate love and its consequences—should be known to the brother of whom she stands so much in awe."

"I promise your ladyship not only this—but anything else that you may choose to ask of me and which I may have the power to perform," replied the voluptuary, assuming a significant tenderness

of tone and manner which Eleanor could not avoid noticing, but which she affected not to perceive. "There is one point, however, which you must clear up, beauteous lady," he continued, after a few moments' pause: "and we will then change the conversation, — nay, more — we will consign the topic to oblivion, at least so far as words are concerned."

"And that point?" said the Countess, interrogatively.

"The name of the individual in whose arms my sister forgot her duty and her chastity," was the prompt reply. "You will reveal that secret to me——"

"Never!" ejaculated Eleanor, in a determined tone. "Your Royal Highness must indeed entertain a despicable opinion of me, to imagine even for an instant that I should betray the illustrious Princess who has honoured me with her confidence, and whose friendship I enjoy."

And the magnificent eyes of the lady flashed forth the fires of indignation and wounded pride.

"Pardon me, lovely Countess—pardon me!" exclaimed the Prince, falling on his knees at her feet, and seizing one of her hands, which he pressed to his lips.

Eleanor was so amazed and bewildered by this sudden action on his part, that she had not presence of mind sufficient to enable her immediately to withdraw her hand; and the royal voluptuary, who never entertained a very high opinion of female virtue, pressed that fair hand all the more warmly to his lips, with the idea that it was now voluntarily abandoned to him.

For an instant living lightning seemed to circulate with thrilling transport through the veins of the lady—and an ineffable sensation of bliss seized upon her: but in another moment her virtue triumphed over the ardour of her nature—and, snatching back her hand, she exclaimed, "Your Royal Highness forgets who I am!"

The dignity of this reproach—the tone in which it was uttered—and the manner with which it was accompanied, would have covered with confusion and shame any other libertine than the Prince of Wales. But being accustomed to an almost unprecedented success amongst women, and setting little value upon the first display of resistance to his will, he was unabashed by the reproof which he now experienced.

"Never will I rise from my knees, dearest lady," he exclaimed, "until you declare that you have pardoned me for the rudeness—nay, the insult which I offered you a few minutes ago. Tell me that I am forgiven!"

"To relieve myself from the embarrassment of the present proceeding, I at once comply with the demand of your Royal Highness," said the Countess, in a cold and dignified manner. "Let the past—so far as it in any way regards the late painful subject of our discourse—be buried in complete oblivion."

"A thousand thanks for this kind proposal!" exclaimed the Prince, rising from his knees, and resuming his seat upon the sofa. "But how was it, charming lady, that you appeared to be offended by the slight compliment which I ere now paid to your beauty and your amiability?—wherefore did you withdraw your hand as if it were in the grasp of some hideous monster?"

"Rather let me inquire wherefore your Royal Highness should imagine that I could have acted otherwise than as I did?" asked the Countess, somewhat moved by the melting tone in which he spoke and by the tenderness of his manner.

"I must confess that I am utterly unworthy of any mark of favour at the hands of your ladyship," said the Prince. "A being so radiant in beauty as yourself—enjoying a reputation which is like the spotless mirror whence the breath breathed on its pure surface passes rapidly away—endowed with an intellect as bright as your virtues are estimable,—such a being, I say, is so far above a poor miserable mortal like myself——"

"Surely your Royal Highness must be delivering a satire against me?" exclaimed the Countess, scarcely knowing whether to be offended or to laugh, as this panegyric on herself, involving such an absurd contrast, was poured upon her ears.

"I never was more in earnest in my life!" cried the Prince, in an impassioned tone. "I have observed you at the Court—I have seen your lovely form moving in the mazes of the dance—and I now behold you by the domestic hearth;—and you appear more beauteous in my eyes, in that comparatively simple dress than when the diamonds on your brow glisten amidst the blazing lamps of fashion's busy scene. Think not that I am paying you an idle compliment—fancy not that I am offering up to you the incense of a passing flattery. No—on my soul, sweet Countess, I could again fall at your feet—I could worship you—only that I fear you would repulse my adoration with scorn and overwhelm me with reproaches."

"And you dare not venture to encounter this terrible wrath?" said the Countess, smiling, while the warm blood rushed to her cheeks—for all the fires of her ardent nature were kindled rapidly by the burning and impassioned looks which the Prince fixed upon her.

"Ah! then you could not be cruel towards me!" he exclaimed, devouring with those looks the charms which shone so resplendently in the mellowed lustre shed by the lamp on the table and the wax-candles on the mantel: for lights were already burning in the room when his visit was announced.

"Believe me, your Royal Highness, that I am taking all you say as a series of very pretty compliments, for which, as in duty bound, I tender you my most grateful thanks," said Eleanor, resolved to wrestle against the ardour of those passions which were exercising so powerful an influence over her; and therefore, in pursuance of this determination, she affected not to perceive the real drift of the Prince's language.

"Oh! wherefore do you treat as a jest that which is so solemnly serious?" demanded the heir-apparent: and, placing his hand upon his heart, he exclaimed in a tone of enthusiasm, "By heaven divine creature, I love you—and, if you scorn this avowal of my passion, you will plunge me into despair!"

Thus speaking, he threw his arms round Eleanor's form and clasped her in a fervent embrace ere she could even recover from the surprise into which this sudden proceeding threw her;—and in an instant his lips were pressed to her's—and the delicious transports which animated him were transfused, warm and impassioned, throughout her entire being. For a few moments she yielded to the profound sense of enjoy-

ment that thus seized upon her—she allowed herself to be carried away on the flood of ecstatic feelings which engulfed her soul; and though she gave not back again that burning kiss, she nevertheless withdrew not the mouth to which it seemed to grow.

But when the Prince, encouraged by this apparent abandonment of her person to him, sought to snatch farther favours, she violently disengaged herself from his arms—and, hurriedly arranging the bosom of her dress, which his daring hand had disturbed, she exclaimed, "Think not that you obtained the least particle of permanent advantage over me. Amazement—confusion—bewilderment rendered me weak for a moment: but your Royal Highness must not again venture to treat me with insult!"

And, having thus spoken, she rang the bell.

"In the name of Gladd what do you mean, lovely Countess?" demanded the Prince, almost astounded by this proceeding, and likewise starting up from the sofa.

"Compose yourself," said Eleanor, with a calm and noble dignity: then, as the door opened and a domestic appeared, she exclaimed, "His Royal Highness desires that his carriage may immediately be drawn up to the door."

"His Royal Highness's carriage is in attendance, my lady," responded the lacquey.

"You shall yet be mine, haughty beauty—I swear it!" whispered the Prince hurriedly, as he affected to bow in a conventional manner as he took his departure.

"I thank your Royal Highness for the honour of this visit," said the Countess aloud—so that the servant who held the door open observed not that anything unusual was taking place.

The Prince darted upon Eleanor a look of mingled fearfulness and menace, and quitted the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

CAROLINE AND THE YOUNG LADY.

We must now return to the abode of Mrs. Lindley in Fore Street, Lambeth.

Three days had passed since that terrible night on which Caroline Walters had contemplated the horrors of the store-room, and had heard the small shrill shriek of the new-born child whom the old harridan had so ruthlessly consigned to the dark depths of the turbid Thames.

It will be recollected that she had already cherished a sentiment of vengeance against the man who had seduced and betrayed her—and that she afterwards united with that resolve a vow to seek some means of punishing the old midwife who had enacted the principal part in the appalling tragedy of that dreadful night.

During the three days which had elapsed since then, Caroline had pondered—deeply pondered—on those resolutions; and the more she meditated upon them, the more were they strengthened in her bosom. But she was at present powerless: and many weeks must probably elapse ere she would be again free and in a condition to enter upon the execution of her designs. Nor as yet had those designs assumed any settled shape in her imagination: she nursed them—she clung to them;—but she must trust to accident to point out the way to carry them into effect.

At all events, for the time being it was necessary for her to maintain a calm, placid, and even contented demeanour in the presence of Mrs. Lindley and the young ladies who were her fellow-lodgers in the accursed establishment: for she, poor girl, was so utterly friendless that she was compelled to submit to all the arrangements which Mrs. Brace had made for her;—and, being in the way to become a mother, she naturally clung to the asylum, though vile and abhorrent it were, which had been provided for her against the time when the hour of suffering and the pangs of maternity should overtake her. But she nevertheless vowed within herself that if the child which was then moving in her bosom should be born alive, it should escape the murderous intentions which Mrs. Lindley doubtless had in store with regard to it.

The clock at Lambeth Palace had proclaimed the hour of six in the evening, and Caroline Walters was in conversation with her fellow-lodgers in the sitting-room allotted to them generally, when an old nurse entered and summoned her to the presence of the midwife.

Caroline repaired to the parlour where Mrs. Lindley was seated; but she shuddered when the reptile-like gaze of that woman was fixed upon her—for never since the night of horrors had she met that look without experiencing a cold sensation as if the hand of a corpse were passing slowly over her naked flesh.

"Shut the door, my dear child," said Mrs. Lindley, speaking in that subdued tone which had become habitual to her. "Hush! not so violently—remember there's an invalid up-stairs. And now sit down for a few moments: I wish to speak to you particularly."

Caroline took a chair, and awaited in silence the communication that was to follow.

"My dear girl," resumed Mrs. Lindley, caressing her great black cat, but still keeping her eyes steadily fixed on Miss Walters,—"I have selected you from amongst the rest to undertake an office which may afford a little variety and change for you. You are aware that in the next chamber to yours a young lady has very recently become a mother. Fortunately for her, poor thing! the child was born dead——But what is the matter with you, my love?" suddenly exclaimed the midwife. "You appear to be unwell!"

"No, ma'am—it is nothing," hastily responded Caroline, who had been unable to subdue a shudder which was this time fully perceptible: for her whole frame had become convulsed on hearing the dreadful woman give utterance to so calm and deliberate a falsehood respecting the young lady's child. "It is nothing, I can assure you," repeated Miss Walters, fearful of exciting a suspicion that she knew the real truth regarding that murdered infant. "But what you were saying made me think that my time is rapidly approaching——"

"Hush!" murmured the midwife, placing her long lean finger to her thin pale lip, and contracting her thick and prominent eye-brows: "the very walls have ears, as I am constantly telling you all! But you must not give way to nervous apprehensions my love: you must keep up your courage—and you will pass through the ordeal in safety. Recollect that I yield the palm of skill and success in midwifery to no living practitioner, male or female; and therefore it is fortunate for you that our dear kind friend, the excellent Mrs. Brace, has entrusted you

to my care. However—let us return to what I was just now saying. We were speaking of the young lady who occupies the next chamber to yours. That young lady, as you have already been informed, is of high birth—and her name must continue to be veiled in the deepest mystery. She requires a companion—some one who will consent to pass a few hours with her each day, and who will neither seek to draw from her who she is, nor recognise her again should they ever meet hereafter in the great and busy world without. Poor creature! she feels sad and lonely—for the nurse is certainly no fitting associate;—and I have so many things to attend to, that I can give her but little of my company. Under all these circumstances I have determined to select you as the most genteel—most amiable—and most discreet of the young females from whom such a choice could be made."

"I shall cheerfully undertake the duty of rendering the time as agreeable as possible to the lady," said Caroline, both flattered and pleased at having been thus marked out for the task.

"You may, then, at once ascend to her chamber, my dear," returned Mrs. Lindley. "But, mark!—not a word to the others—or they will be jealous; and they will likewise overwhelm you with impertinent questions whenever they see you. Let them believe that your habits have grown more retired, and that you love to seek the solitude of your own room. By producing this impression upon them, you may easily pass a few hours every day with the young lady, and not be observed by the rest. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, madam," answered Caroline;—and she then withdrew from the midwife's parlour.

In the room to which the girl now ascended, a beauteous creature occupied a bed tastefully fitted up and of a more luxurious character than those in the other dormitories.

The young lady was about eighteen. Her eyes were not particularly large, and of the deepest violet blue, shaded by long jetty lashes, and capable of undergoing every variety of expression. When stormy and soul-piercing, they appeared to be black as night and burning with an overwhelming lustre;—and if eyes could slay, those were the orbs which might have had the power to shoot forth the fiery arrows of death. But when beaming with love, and melting and tender, these eyes were of a purple hue so exquisitely soft that it seemed as if they could never assume a look of wildness and fierceness—never menace with their vengeful glances, nor scar with their lightning brilliancy.

Her hair was of a dark brown—of such glossy richness that it seemed of a fainter and more golden hue where the light rested upon it, and black where the shade remained. Her skin was of the purest—most snowy white, save where veined with the pale sapphire's tint: for the gentle hue of the rose which suits upon her cheeks when she was in health, had now fled—and yet her pallor was not ghastly nor corpse-like—no, nor even sickly, though produced by indisposition;—neither was it insipid—but it was interesting. And in strong contrast therewith was the perfectly scarlet richness of her lips, which denoted the warmth of her temperament and the ardour of her nature. The proudly rising throat, sloping shoulders, and well-developed contours of the bust were in harmony with a very slender waist and finely proportioned limbs: for though she was not above the middle stature of her sex, her symmetry was admirable.

Such was the young lady in whose presence Caroline Walters now found herself; and for a few instants she stood gazing upon her in mingled admiration and respect.

"Come near me—give me your hand," said the fair patrician, in a winning tone which immediately placed the young woman at her ease; and, advancing to the bed, she took the proffered hand which she pressed cordially as if to imply a hope that they should agree well together. "Yes—we will be friends," added the lady, either divining what passed in the other's mind, or else struck by the same sentiment. "*Your* name is Caroline Walters. Mrs. Lindley told me that she should select you to be my companion. At present you must not seek to know who *I* am: but if I continue to like you as well as I do now under the influence of a first impression, I will make you my confidant—I will keep no secrets from you."

Caroline was moved almost to tears by the amiable softness which characterised the patrician's tone, looks, and manner as she thus spoke;—and while the young woman gazed on that heavenly countenance, she could not conceive it possible that one so winning, so fascinating, and so tender could have connived at the foul tragedy which had been enacted on the night of whirlwind and of tempest.

Nevertheless, this was a point upon which Caroline had resolved to satisfy herself so soon as an opportunity should occur.

"Sit down by my side, my dear friend—for so I shall call you," resumed the lady, sinking back on the pillow whence she had raised herself on Caroline's entrance. "Let us endeavour to console each other. You have doubtless been deceived and betrayed by a villain, as I have been: you have perhaps loved as I have loved——"

"Oh! yes—my love was a worship—an idolatry!" exclaimed Caroline. "And now, nothing remains for me but——"

"Despair or vengeance!" murmured the patrician, in a tone so altered—so changed from that in which she had previously spoken, that Miss Walters started up in affright; for it struck her at the instant that some other voice had breathed these terrible words in the room.

"Yes—despair or vengeance," echoed Caroline, the moment she recovered her self-possession. "But it shall not be *the former*," she added gloomily: then, fearing that she had said too much, the young woman hastened to observe, "I was however wrong to evince such a feeling, which can only tend to make you detest me——"

"Detest you!" ejaculated the patrician, starting up in her couch, a wild light suddenly flashing in her eyes: "I should despise and hate you, were you calmly and resignedly to endure the wrongs which you may have suffered at the hands of a man! Love is the religion of the heart, Caroline," she continued, in an impressive tone: "it will either elevate those who cherish it, to the condition of saints—or it will hurl them, like fallen angels, into that abyss where rage the flames of vengeance and remorse. *We* are the fallen angels, Caroline—and like fiends should we war against those who have plunged us into the hell of our outraged feelings, our blighted affections and our ruined hopes!"

The transition of the lady's manner from the most amiable softness and winning gentleness to violence and bitterness was so rapid, and accompanied by such a change in the entire expression of her countenance, that Caroline for a moment shrank back in dismay and averted her looks: but the next instant a species of horrible fascination which she could not resist made her glance towards the invalid again—and then her eyes were rivetted, spell-bound, upon the features which were so touching in the repose of the soul, and so terrible in the bosom's storm and tempest.

"Caroline—my friend," continued the lady, in a voice of such keen bitterness and withering acrimony that it seemed as if a demoness spoke within her; "my heart is at times the prey to fiends who infuse into my veins a horrible madness! Oh! for the rage—the fury—the havoc of conflict, look not into history's pages in search of sanguinary fights—seek not descriptions of bloody battles and the murderous storming of cities and sack of towns: but down, deep into the human heart must your eyes plunge—and there, in the profundities of that mortal pandemonium, will you behold a more tremendous spectacle of strife—and war—and horror—and devastation! Such at least is my heart at times, when I ponder on all my wrongs: such is it at this moment!"

And although the lady sank back, through sheer exhaustion, on her pillow—yet the terrible workings of her countenance—the fire flashing from her eyes—the quivering of her lips—the convulsive heavings of her bosom—and the spasmodic tremor that perceptibly agitated her very limbs beneath the bedclothes, bore appalling evidence to the truth of the words which had last fallen from her tongue. Yes—such indeed, as she had described it, was the state of her heart at that moment;—and, in spite of all the vindictive fire which Caroline's Spanish blood circulated through her veins, yet was she horrified and amazed at the spectacle which that patrician now presented to her view.

But the paroxysm of fiend-like fury and demoniac wildness which had thus convulsed the lady, gradually subsided—until she at length regained her former calmness of manner and sweet placidity of countenance.

"I have alarmed and horrified you, Caroline," she observed, in the most melting cadence of her musical voice: "but you will forgive me—for I am a terrible creature when my passions are aroused. I know no middle state of temperament. Tranquil as the lake when not a breeze ruffles its bosom—or furious as the roaring, raging ocean, when lashed into black and mountainous billows: *that* is my character! I can love with a devotion so complete that the rack or the scaffold would only raise smiles to my lips, were the penalty to be endured in order to save from injury a single hair of the adored one's head: but I can, on the other hand, hate with so refined an intensity that I would sell my soul to Satan in order to ensure the gratification of my vengeance."

"You teach me a lesson, lady, which I ought to have learnt of my own accord," said Caroline, catching, as if by mesmeric influence, the spirit which animated the extraordinary young creature whose lips could tutor themselves to give utterance to such strong epithets and such terse and vigorous language. "I also have dreamt of vengeance, lady—I also have terrible wrongs to goad me on to the fury of a remorseless fiend. But I never thought of a vengeance so deadly—so unrelenting—so complete, as that which you appear to cherish. Oh! I rejoice that I have thus been thrown in your way: for, at a humble distance, my nature resembles your own. Too meek—too humble—too enduring—and too fond, on the one hand, all that I need on the other is a glorious example to set the energies of my soul—my Spanish soul—into an appalling conflagration."

"Let your meekness turn to pride, as the rivulet that flows on in smiles hardens into stern and impenetrable ice," exclaimed the patrician, the brilliant fire again lighting up in her eyes, and the hectic flush of excitement mantling on her damask cheeks "It were folly—madness—grovelling absurdity, to allow the tender reminiscences of the past to paralyse you for the present, or disarm you for the future. The more softly and sweetly gushed the current of your young heart's bright affections—the darker, and blacker, and stormier should roll the eddies of that ruined heart's direst hate and insatiable vengeance. Listen, Caroline," continued the lady, her tone suddenly assuming the seriousness of profound pathos: "I have loved as never woman loved before—I worshipped the very ground upon which *he* trod. To breathe the same air with him was a luxury ineffable—to behold his eyes beaming upon me with the rapture of passion, was a bliss indescribable. I gave him the rich gift of a heart that had never loved before—a heart fraught with the most fervent affections, and not palled by the pleasures and dissipation of this world. And how has he rewarded me?"

"Such was my case—and the reward which I have reaped is the same that you have experienced," said Caroline. "Oh! show me the way to be avenged, dear lady—and I will bless the hour that brought us thus together."

"My vengeance is already progressing—and it is terrible!" murmured the patrician, in a low but hoarse whisper, while a sombre shade spread itself over her features. "He suspects not that my revenge is thus slowly, mysteriously, but surely overtaking him: but, when I come to know you better, Caroline, my secret shall be revealed to you—and the same means which I am now employing, may become equally effective in your hands. First, however, I must assure myself that your disposition resembles mine—and that this enthusiasm which you have now shown is the natural result of an energetic soul, and not an evanescent feeling sympathetically aroused by the words that have fallen from my lips."

"Believe me, dear lady, I shall study to deserve your confidence," answered Caroline. "But, hark!" she exclaimed abruptly, as she placed her finger upon her lip;—"footsteps ascend the stairs—it is Mrs. Lindley who is approaching."

The patrician sank back upon her pillow and instantly composed her countenance. Miss Walters reseated herself;—and thus, when the midwife entered the room, nothing betrayed to her searching glance the terrible nature of the discourse which the two vindictive young women had held together.

"Caroline," said Mrs. Lindley, "you may now rejoin your companions. To-morrow you can again visit your new acquaintance, provided that your society be agreeable."

"Oh! yes," exclaimed the invalid: "she is an amiable girl—and I already love her. The more of her company that she can devote to me, the

better I shall be pleased. Good evening, Caroline —kiss me."

And as Miss Walters embraced the patrician, a rapid glance of intelligence passed between them —a silent vow to observe the strictest and most solemn secrecy with regard to the confidence which they had already exchanged.

When Caroline had quitted the room, Mrs. Lindley, having listened until her retreating footsteps along the passage were no longer audible, approached the bed, and observed in a mysterious whisper, "The Countess of Desborough is below, and desires to see you. She has a communication of importance to make."

"Let her come up, my good friend," returned the patrician.

"But I have something else to tell you," continued the midwife;—"and I beg and implore that you will not excite yourself."

"Proceed. I am calm—and shall remain so," was the cool and collected response.

"A young gentleman is with her ladyship——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the invalid, a fearful gloom overspreading her countenance.

"Now, in the name of heaven! be tranquillised," said Mrs. Lindley, in an imploring tone. "The Countess gave me the strictest injunctions not to tell you that any one was with her: but this command I could not obey—for a single glance at that young man convinced me that *he*——"

"Yes—yes; I understand you," hastily interrupted the lady. "But, tell me, my good friend—is he in the desperate state which has been represented to us?—has my vengeance——"

"Hush!—for God's sake, hush!" said the midwife, in a hoarse whisper. "The very walls have ears! You must not appear to know that *he* is in the house, until the Countess chooses to communicate the fact. For that he has come hither to obtain an interview with you, through your aunt's intercession, is very evident. And now, dear young lady, should his grief—his penitence—his tears

move your heart, you will not reveal to him that dreadful secret which——"

"Do you consider me to be so weak—so insane?" demanded the patrician.

"Hush!—I have a better opinion of you," returned Mrs. Lindley, who nevertheless trembled all over. "But pray forgive me for reminding you that a single suspicion engendered in the breast of that young man, may cost both you and me our very lives!" she added in a tone scarcely audible, but with a terrible emphasis.

"Scatter all apprehensions to the winds," answered the invalid. "You know that my resolution is indomitable—that my heart is of steel——"

"Otherwise I should never have been induced to assist you as I have done," observed the midwife. "And now compose yourself, dear lady—for in a few minutes the Countess will be in your presence."

"It is for you to tranquillise yourself, my good friend," was the response, accompanied by a reassuring smile: "for your lips quiver—and you seem to be in a nervous tremor."

"Now that I am certain you will behave with prudence," added Mrs. Lindley, "I shall appear both firm and collected. But, remember," she whispered, as she stooped down until her lips touched the lady's ear,—"remember that the child was still-born—and that it was buried the next day in Lambeth churchyard, no funeral service being necessary."

"I understand you. And now leave me—or they will wonder at your protracted absence."

Mrs. Lindley accordingly quitted the chamber, to which the Countess of Desborough ascended almost immediately afterwards.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE BOOK-CASE.—FERNANDA AND ARTHUR.

The Hon. Mr. Eaton remained in the parlour downstairs with the midwife, while Lady Desborough undertook to prepare the way for an interview between himself and Fernanda Aylmer—for the reader has doubtless already seen that the Earl's niece and the young patrician lodger in Mrs. Lindley's establishment are one and the same person.

The midwife seated herself beside the fire—caressed her great cat—and then threw a furtive glance upon Arthur Eaton;—and an icy chill shot to her heart when she observed his eyes fixed upon her as if to read what was passing in her mind. But this was only imagination on her part—the effect of a guilty soul: for the young gentleman was merely indulging a listless curiosity when he thus surveyed the forbidding countenance of the old harridan to whose care Fernanda had been consigned by her noble uncle.

"The child was still-born, Mrs. Lindley—eh?" he said at length, by way of saying something.

"Yes, sir—and no one can regret it, under all circumstances," responded the midwife.

"Did *she* suffer much?" was Eaton's next inquiry.

"Hush! not so loud—walls have ears!" whispered the midwife, placing her finger upon her thin lip as she gave utterance to her favourite axiom. "Yes—she suffered a great deal, sir: it was night-time when it took place—and the wind was roaring dreadfully It drowned her screams effectually."

Mr. Eaton shuddered, he scarcely knew why; and a long silence followed.

"How was it that the Earl became acquainted with your establishment?" inquired Mr. Eaton, again breaking a silence which had something awful in it: for he felt growing upon him the superstitious but irresistible idea that he was in the presence of some old witch intimately acquainted with the dread and forbidden secrets of nature.

"I never reveal matters of that kind, sir," answered Mrs. Lindley, laconically. "The large amount of patronage I receive has been obtained through the confidence which may be placed in me."

"I beg your pardon for putting an impertinent question," said the Hon. Mr. Eaton. "I ought to have known better."

"There's no offence, sir—but I am sure you will be more pleased with my prudence for not gossiping," returned Mrs. Lindley, attempting to smile—which was rather difficult, at least to do it blandly, with such a countenance as the one that she possessed.

There was another long pause; and in about ten minutes a servant entered and whispered in the old woman's ear that one of the young ladies had been taken suddenly unwell and was obliged to retire to her chamber. Mrs. Lindley apologised to Mr. Eaton for leaving him, and quitted the parlour.

The young gentleman, finding himself alone, began to think that the interview between the Countess of Desborough and Fernanda Aylmer was unnecessarily long;—and a feeling of uneasiness, for which he could scarcely account, stole over him as he cast his eyes round the sombre-looking room, whose gloomy aspect was rather shadowed forth than relieved by the dimly burning candles and the flickering light of the fire.

Rising from his seat, he examined the portraits of eminent physicians suspended to the walls; and his tour round the little parlour brought him to the antique book-case, on the shelves of which were the mouldy volumes treating of midwifery and the uses of herbs, and the huge Bible fastened with silver clasps.

This book-case had glass doors, which the old woman was accustomed to keep carefully secured but on the present occasion it happened that she had left the key in the lock. The fact was that she had been studying one of the books when the Countess of Desborough and Mr. Eaton arrived; and in her haste to greet the visitors, she had forgotten her usual caution—thus merely turning the key without taking it from the lock.

Mr. Eaton, fancying that there could be no harm in examining the contents of the books, took one down from the shelf in order to while away the time until the Countess should rejoin him: but as he opened the volume a piece of paper fell from between its leaves. He picked it up; and, glancing over it was struck by the words which were written on the top

These words were—"The Heir's Friend."

Taking it nearer to the light of the candles, Mr Eaton had the curiosity to examine the contents of this document; and he found it to be a receipt for some purpose or another, but for what he entertained no idea. He opened the book again in order to place it between the leaves;—when his eyes fell upon another paper, also held loose in the volume and evidently put there for safety.

This second scrap of writing he examined; and found it to be another receipt, on the top of which appeared these words—"THE ANTIDOTE TO THE HEIR'S FRIEND."

"Antidote!" he murmured to himself, while a cold shudder passed over his thin and wasted frame, as if a hyperborean wind had suddenly swept round him fresh from the icy coast of far-off Labrador: "that terrible word is ever associated, in a negative sense, with *poison!* This, then, must be the bane," he thought within himself, as he glanced at the first paper which he had seen: "and this is its antidote," he added, bending his eyes upon the second. "Oh! is it possible that the old hag whose very appearance froze the blood in my veins and filled me with vague and indescribable sensations of horror—is it possible that she can practise other and darker acts than those of midwifery?"

Then, obeying an irresistible feeling of curiosity, he seated himself at the table, and, by the aid of a silver pencil-case which he had about him, proceeded to copy on the back of a letter the two receipts that seemed to be invested with so sinister and mysterious an interest. All this was the work of a few minutes; —and having yielded to the sudden impulse that thus prompted him to adopt the means of instituting future inquiries into the nature of the receipts, he replaced them in the volume, which he restored to the shelf.

Having closed the book-case, he returned to his seat: but scarcely had he regained his chair, when the midwife came back to the room.

As she entered, her eye caught sight of the key in the lock of the book-case; and Arthur Eaton observed that she started as with a slight tremor. At the same instant she darted a rapid and searching glance upon him—for her avocations, both ostensible and secret, naturally made her suspicious: and knowing that she had committed an oversight in leaving the key in the lock, her guilty conscience momentarily made her shudder lest her visitor should have pryed into the secrets of that book-case.

But the calmness which he had assumed sate with so natural an air upon his pale countenance, that she was instantly reassured;—and, taking out the key, she returned to her seat.

The change in her manner however struck Mr. Eaton;—and he felt more convinced than ever that something awfully mysterious was associated with the receipts which he had just found in the old volume.

Soon after the return of Mrs. Lindley to the parlour, the Countess of Desborough made her appearance. The midwife then withdrew again, in order to allow the noble lady an opportunity of conversing unrestrainedly with the Hon. Mr. Eaton.

"Fernanda will see you," said Eleanor, the moment the door had closed behind Mrs. Lindley. "But I warn you that it will prove a difficult task to persuade her to accept the reparation which you have proposed to make her. My interview with her has lasted an hour," added the Countess, referring to her watch;—"and you may therefore judge that much argument has already been used, and many objections encountered on my side."

"Am I to see her alone?" asked Mr. Eaton, in a subdued and tremulous tone—for he dreaded the meeting, although he himself had courted it in the first instance.

"Yes—alone," returned the Countess. "Follow me: I will conduct you to the door of Fernanda's chamber."

They accordingly ascended the stairs—and in less than a minute Arthur Eaton found himself in the presence of the wronged Fernanda.

She was seated up in the bed, supported by pillows, and with a large shawl thrown loosely over her shoulders.

An unnatural fire shone in her eyes, and the scarlet of her lips was perfectly brilliant—these indications of strong inward emotions contrasting strangely with the pallor of her countenance. One white hand lay beneath her head, the fingers clutching the dark brown tresses, as if by that action she held back the feelings which struggled in her bosom for a vent; while the other hand, cast upon the outside of the coverlid, trembled nervously—or rather convulsively. The undulated swelling and sinking of the throat and the rapid heaving of the bosom were additional signs of the tempest that was warring in her heart.

Eaton, who knew her well, saw that she was far from tranquil, but that she was labouring to assume a composure the efforts to force which did her harm. Enfeebled and attenuated as he was, the spectacle made him tremble throughout his entire being: and uninvited he sank upon a chair placed near the couch.

"At length we meet again, Fernanda," he murmured, in a suffocating voice.

"Yes—at length we meet again," she repeated, in a low and even hoarse tone, so different from those melodious accents which had once filled his ears with delight and infused joy and happiness into his very soul. "But how and where do we meet, Arthur?" she demanded, fixing her eyes upon him. "Oh! cast your looks around this room and tell me whether it be such an one as that to which I have been accustomed! Think of the situation of this house—in an obscure street belonging to a vile neighbood,—a street and a district unknown to me until I came hither! Think, too, of the nature of this house —an asylum for the victims of man's deceit or of their own depravity! And have you seen the woman who keeps this house?—is she not a fitting genius to preside over so abominable a den? Who, then, is the cause of my consignment to such a place and to the care of such a hag?"

Eaton could not reply: he was alarmed by the gathering vehemence with which she spoke, and by the increasing brilliancy of these eyes which appeared to shed flames upon him.

"What! you cannot answer me?" resumed Fernanda, bitterly. "Oh! wherefore have you come hither? Is it to gloat over me in my misfortune?—is it to feast your eyes upon my unhappiness?—is it to avenge yourself for any harsh word that may ever have escaped my lips in those days when you taught me to believe that you loved me?—is it to punish me for any whim or caprice of which I might have thoughtlessly made you the victim, but for which I was always wont to demand your pardon with tears streaming down my cheeks? If these be the objects for which you have sought me in my wretched retreat, they are fully gained: for it is indeed the once lovely, courted, and brilliant Fernanda Aylmer whom you find beneath this detestable roof!"

"My God! you will drive me mad!" exclaimed Eaton. "Have you no compassion upon me—no mercy?" he demanded, his soul cruelly rent by her unjust observations, which were nevertheless so keen

and cutting. "Look at me, Fernanda—gaze intently upon me—see to what I am reduced! An unknown and terrible malady has seized upon me,—I am dying by inches,—I have not a year's—no, nor six months' life in me,—and I am come to offer you the only reparation which it is in my power to propose. But surely the Countess of Desborough has already explained this much to you?"

"She has told me that you would now become my husband—and she has urged me to accept the offer," answered Fernanda, who did not require to be told to contemplate the wreck to which the young man was reduced: for from the first moment that he entered the room she had secretly gloated over that human ruin! "The Countess of Desborough," continued Fernanda, "used every possible argument which her generous nature could suggest or her brilliant intellect devise, in order to induce me to accept this proposal which you have made so tardily—so very tardily. I was inexorable: but she implored me to see you. At first I refused—until it struck me that I should like to gaze upon your altered appearance and assure myself that the information I had received concerning you was correct."

"Then is it possible that you rejoice in this frightful malady which has seized upon me and which baffles the art of the first physicians of the day?" exclaimed Eaton, horror and dismay depicted upon his countenance.

"Would you learn the truth?" asked Fernanda, bending upon him a look so full of fiend-like hatred that it enhanced ten thousand-fold the exquisite tortures which his mind was already enduring.

"No—no!" he ejaculated, starting wildly from his seat. "I will hurry away from your presence—I never ought to have ventured hither! You loathe—hate—and abhor me;—and I am frightened by your looks—horrified by your manner! Farewell, Fernanda—farewell!"

And he hastened towards the door of the chamber.

"Stay!" she exclaimed, in a tone so thrilling and penetrating that it seemed to pierce through his ears and his brain down into his very heart.

He stopped short, as if transfixed: then, staggering back, he sank into the seat which he had just quitted.

"You must not leave me thus!" resumed Fernanda: "I cannot permit you to depart while any doubt remains in *your* mind respecting *my* feelings. For as yet you only suspect that I loathe—hate—and abhor you," she continued, dwelling with demoniac bitterness upon the words: "whereas it is necessary that you should be convinced. Listen to me, Arthur Eaton—and interrupt me not. My heart is a withered and blighted thing—a crushed and ruined rose-bud: and yet when I contemplate its depths, I can well remember and well understand now ineffable was the aroma of love which it once exhaled. And all that love was thine—freely given and joyously accepted. In return you pledged your own affections, which surrounded me as with a halo of happiness. Then you took advantage of my tenderness—and I resigned my honour into your keeping. Perhaps I also was weak—frail—feeble: but a young woman is never the seducer of a young man! When you had possessed me you began to discover faults in my temper—you accused me of whims—and you upbraided me for caprices. But it was because you desired to play the tyrant and the despot with me, that I asserted my own independence—the independence of a woman! When I knew that I was wrong, and reflection told me that I had behaved unjustly towards you, I besought your pardon—with tears I invoked your forgiveness. And I take God to witness the truth of my assertion, that when I seemed most capricious I loved you the most ardently. Oh! you cannot understand all that there is noble and elevated in the mind of a woman who truly loves. At the very instant when I was vexing you with some whim, I could have torn to pieces any other human being that dared only to look insultingly upon you: at the very moment that I was piquing you with some frivolous coquetry on my part, I could have laid down my life to save you from a single pang. Was this a heart to be trampled beneath your foot? Who is perfect in this world? But no allowance is made for poor Woman! You defoliated the flower of my chastity—you robbed me of my purity—and you then discovered that I was capricious. When I had become to you as a wife in the sight of heaven, you began to find out my faults and my foibles. Just God! did not the immensity of my love in the other scale outweigh them all? But Man conceives that he may trifle as he will with the best and purest affections of Woman's heart—that he may lead her into frailty and seduce her into folly—and then raise up a thousand excuses for not fulfilling the solemn pledges that elicited those concessions of her weak and confiding nature. Yes—these are the ideas which *your* sex entertains: and Woman encourages you in your iniquity because she so seldom avenges her shame and her dishonour. She weeps in secret—but rouses not herself to exertion. She pines—but does not punish. Such will not be the case with me!"

Fernanda fell back exhausted, and panting for breath: for the excitement and the vehemence with which she had spoken were terrible in the extreme.

Arthur Eaton had remained seated in utter stupefaction. He lost not a single word which fell from her lips—but those words petrified him. Statue-like, the unhappy young man listened to those dread reproaches—those dire denunciations—those concluding menaces;—and it appeared to him that he was the victim of some horrible dream. But he saw how much of the upbraiding was true: and he who had endeavoured to cheat himself into the belief that *all* the fault lay on her side, was compelled to confess in the depths of his spirit that the preponderance was indeed on his own.

"Now, then, can you answer me?" inquired Fernanda, suddenly raising herself up in the bed again. "And do you comprehend me?—do you understand why I indeed loathe—hate—and abhor you?—do you know wherefore I crave for vengeance, or why I can be satisfied with that which heaven is wreaking on you?" she demanded, suddenly struck by the fear that she had said too much and that her meaning might perhaps become intelligible. "Oh! think not for a single instant that I could so far forget my wrongs as to accompany you to the altar:—think not that I can now receive as a boon that which you denied me as a right—or that I will accept as a tardy reparation the alliance which you were once proud and happy to propose! No—ten thousand times no! And if, when your last hours come—and they cannot be far distant—if *then* a thought of the injured Fernanda should rise up in your soul and wring you with remorse—Oh! I shall rejoice—I shall rejoice: for I look upon you as my deadliest

foe—my mortal enemy—and the air of this world will be less oppressive to me when *you* shall have ceased to breathe it. And now depart—leave me, Arthur Eaton—I command you!"

But she spoke to one who heard her not: the young man had fainted in his chair.

Fernanda thought that he was dead; and, terror seizing upon her, she rang the bell violently.

Mrs. Lindley, who happened to be in a neighbouring room attending upon the lodger that was unwell, hurried to Miss Aylmer's chamber, where a glance showed her for what purpose she had been summoned. Her experienced eye, however, told her in an instant that it was but a swoon into which the Hon. Arthur Eaton had fallen; and to Fernanda's rapid questions she accordingly gave reassuring answers.

Hastily loosening his neckcloth and opening his waistcoat to give him air, the old woman sprinkled water upon his countenance: but he revived not.

"In his weak and enfeebled state, this may end in *death!*" she murmured in a low but impressive whisper to Miss Aylmer.

"No—no—he must not die yet!" exclaimed Fernanda vehemently: "my vengeance is not half complete!"

"Then naught except a few drops of the *antidote* will save him," returned the midwife: "and as his valet will renew the poison to-morrow——"

"Good! I comprehend you: be it so!" ejaculated Fernanda. "He must not die while I am imprisoned here and unable to mark the progress of his rapid decline. Administer the *antidote*."

The vehemence with which Fernanda had spoken, and which Mrs. Lindley in vain endeavoured to check by placing her finger on her lips, had aroused Mr. Eaton somewhat: but the spiritual sense returned sooner than the physical power—and at the instant he awoke to consciousness, the word "*antidote*" fell upon his ear.

The effect was stupifying—and he once more became motionless as a statue. Both the midwife and Fernanda, who had observed the slight convulsive movement which indicated reviving energy, imagined that he had undergone a complete relapse;—and again did the patrician lady urge the old woman to administer the *antidote*.

Eaton was at this moment in the full enjoyment of his reasoning faculties, though still physically powerless and inert;—and that word, falling again on his ears, convinced him that it was not a delusion when he fancied that he had heard Fernanda give utterance to it a minute before.

Mrs. Lindley hurried from the room;—and the dreadful though still vague suspicion which had flashed to the young man's mind nerved him with the courage and armed him with the resolution to remain perfectly still and tranquil, even now when his limbs were so far recovering their powers that he could have moved them if he had chosen. In fact, he was no longer in a swoon: but he affected to be.

"Where an antidote is administered, *there* poison must have previously been. In this case the antidote can do no harm: besides, it is about to be given in order to restore me."

Such were the ideas that flashed through his brain, during the few moments that Mrs. Lindley's absence lasted. When she returned, she carefully closed the door behind her, and approached the armchair in which Eaton lay back with his mouth half open and his eyes closed. In another moment he felt a small bottle applied to his lips—and a tasteless fluid trickled down his throat.

Having thus administered the antidote, Mrs. Lindley re-corked the bottle, and secured it about her person.

Eaton now affected slowly to revive; and so well did he perform his part, that not even the experienced eyes of the old midwife could detect his duplicity. She handed him a glass of water, which he drank; and in a few moments his recovery seemed complete.

Rising from the chair, he turned one long reproachful look upon Fernanda, who met that gaze with one of mingled menace and defiance;—and he then quitted the room.

On rejoining the Countess of Desborough in the parlour down stairs, he communicated to her in a few rapid words the total failure of his interview with Miss Aylmer: but he said nothing of the swoon into which he had fallen, nor the terrible language which had produced it.

The Countess would have visited Fernanda's chamber again in order to try the effect of renewed prayers, arguments, and remonstrances: but Eaton assured her that her kind interference would not only prove vain and useless, at least on the present occasion, but might injuriously add to the excitement into which the scenes of the evening had thrown the young lady. Eleanor accordingly renounced the idea; and Arthur escorted her to the hackney-coach which was waiting at a little distance.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE BANE AND ANTIDOTE.

When the Hon. Mr. Eaton regained his father's town-mansion, which was situate in Hanover Square, he hastened to his own chamber—threw himself upon a sofa—and gave way to his reflections.

These were of a varied and conflicting nature: for there were several features in the adventures of the evening which appeared to be fraught with a strange, deep, and mysterious interest.

Wherefore should an antidote have been administered to him?—could poison possibly be circulating in his veins?—and if so, how was the fact known to Mrs. Lindley and Fernanda, unless they themselves were the poisoners? Had he providentially discovered a clue to that wasting malady which baffled the skill of so many eminent physicians?—if so, then the antidote was in his possession and he could counteract the effect of the venom which was sapping the very principles of his existence.

That Fernanda was fully capable of wreaking the most deadly vengeance upon him, her language of this night had afforded incontestible proof;—and that she was the authoress of his malady, if it could be attributed to human agency at all, certain words which she had uttered amply showed. Her diabolical will was manifested—her vindictive intent had been avowed—and therefore might she not be already prosecuting her scheme of revenge through the medium of some wretch whom heavy bribes had won over to her interests?

If all these conjectures were accurate, then who could this wretch be? Mr. Eaton's suspicions naturally fell upon the man most constantly about

his person—his valet, William Dudley. But this individual had been in the service of the family for several years; and his character was considered to be unimpeachable. Besides, did not William Dudley testify the most affectionate interest towards his young master?—did he not even weep at times when Arthur spoke in his presence of the unknown malady that was carrying him silently and rapidly to the tomb? Yes—but human nature is capable of such vile hypocrisy!

These were the thoughts which now occupied the Hon. Arthur Eaton; and they bewildered him sorely. He had read of wretches living in the middle ages, and who were such adepts in compounding secret poisons that the *aqua tophana*, one of the most mysterious and deadly venoms ever invented by any votary of that detestable school, was represented to have produced upon its victims effects similar to this malady which was undermining himself. Was it possible that the appalling secret could have been revived in the present age?—and was it in the keeping of that old midwife hag?

The presumption was that an affirmative might be given to these questions.

Nevertheless, was it not probable that his ears had deceived him, and that the word "*antidote*" had not been uttered as he was recovering from his swoon?—was it not likely that the reminiscence of the two receipts was uppermost in his mind as he returned to consciousness, and that the earliest idea which then dawned in upon him had been mistaken by his fevered fancy for a word breathed by the lips of those near him?—or, again, was it not possible that, even if that word had been spoken, it was used by an old hag ignorant of its true meaning and applied by her to some specific medicine of her own?

Then came the conviction that it was Fernanda's lips which had breathed this word;—and Eaton felt the assurance growing stronger and stronger in his mind that accident had placed him in the way to unravel mysterious and terrible things.

At all events the copies of the receipts were in his possession; and a skilful chemist would explain to him the real nature and tendency of each.

It being now eleven o'clock, he rang the bell; and his valet almost immediately answered the summons.

Without appearing to regard him more attentively than usual, Mr. Eaton nevertheless scanned William Dudley's countenance with covert keenness: but not a lineament—not a feature—not a look betrayed anything sinister on the part of that man. Of middle age, florid complexion, light hair, good figure, and most respectable appearance, the valet seemed to be a person incapable of doing a dishonest deed, much more of perpetrating a crime of the blackest dye.

Eaton was again baffled and bewildered: but he resolved to permit his mind to come to no decisive opinion until he should have fathomed those mysteries of which he had as yet only commenced the bare initiative study.

Having laid aside his garments, Arthur retired to rest; and the valet arranged the night-table as usual by the side of the couch. A lamp, the means of procuring a speedy light, a book, a decanter of water, and a tumbler were invariably placed in this manner within his reach. He could not bear a light in the room when he felt inclined to sleep: but he chose to have the materials for procuring one, inasmuch as he frequently passed restless hours, which he endeavoured to while away by reading. He suffered much from thirst; and it was no unusual thing for him to empty the decanter of water during the night. At all events he never failed to drink at least one tumbler.

The valet, having arranged the night-table in the manner described, quitted the room.

Sleep did not immediately visit Arthur's eyes; and as he lay meditating upon the singular incidents of the evening, it suddenly occurred to him that the fluid which had been poured down his throat by Mrs. Lindley, and which was denominated the *antidote*, was tasteless. By a natural sequence in his ideas, he reflected that such a fluid, if it were white,—for he did not catch a glimpse of the bottle that was applied to his lips,—would easily be administered in pure water. Then came the thought that if his valet actually were the wretch through whose agency poison had been given to him, the decanter nightly placed by his side was the means by which the deadly potion was conveyed into his system.

But a chemist would give him explanations on this head as well as with respect to the copies of the two receipts.

Slumber at length fell upon the eyes of the Hon. Mr. Eaton; and, awaking at an earlier hour than usual, he fancied that he felt the least thing better. The reader may be sure that he had not touched the water in the decanter during the night: but now, rising from his bed, he emptied its contents into a bottle, which he locked up in one of his drawers. First, however, he poured a few drops into the tumbler, so as to give the glass the appearance of having been used.

Returning to his couch, he rang the bell for his valet; and when that individual appeared, Eaton, who watched him narrowly without seeming to do so, observed that he cast an immediate and hasty look towards the decanter. Nevertheless, there might be nothing in this: it was perhaps accidental—and moreover Eaton's suspicions were calculated to invest very trivial occurrences with the importance of proofs of guilt. At all events the time had not come to accuse William Dudley; and he therefore behaved towards him with his wonted urbanity and kindness.

Having risen and performed his toilette, Arthur sent a verbal apology to his father, Lord Marchmont, for absenting himself from the breakfast-table, on the plea that he was engaged to partake of that meal with a friend. The fact was that he could restrain his curiosity no longer—he felt that he should be unable to eat another mouthful of food until he had consulted a chemist: for he had the strongest hope, amounting almost to a presentiment, that the matters which he was about to investigate were of the importance of life or death to himself!

With the copy of the receipts in his pocket, and the bottle of water beneath his cloak, Arthur Eaton sallied forth from his father's noble mansion in Hanover Square; and directing his steps towards Bond Street, he entered the shop of a celebrated chemist who supplied the family with the medicine made up according to a physician's prescription.

Mr. Bradford—for such was the chemist's name—was surprised at receiving so early a visit from

the Hon. Mr. Eaton, the deplorable state of whose health was of course well known to him;—and he was still more astonished when Arthur, with an air full of mystery, requested to speak to him in the strictest privacy.

Bradford, who was a tall, thin, pale-faced, elderly man, led the way to his laboratory at the back of the premises, and closed the door. Mr. Eaton requested him to lock it—a demand with which he immediately complied, marvelling more and more what could possibly be the meaning of these precautions.

"I must earnestly and imperiously stipulate, in the first instance," began Arthur, "that you will ask me no questions relative to the way in which I obtained possession of certain receipts respecting which I require an explanation."

"It is not my habit to evince an impertinent curiosity, Mr. Eaton," answered Bradford, somewhat hurt by the nature of the remark.

"I did not mean to offend you, my dear sir," exclaimed Arthur, with a warm sincerity which instantly appeased the chemist, who was a good and kind-hearted man. "But should these receipts turn out as I suspect they will, you will at once perceive that there is some profound mystery regarding the way in which they fell into my hands."

"I will treat the matter purely as one of business," replied Mr. Bradford; "and will seek to learn no more than you may think fit to communicate."

"Thank you for this assurance," rejoined Eaton. "Will you now have the kindness to give me your opinion relative to the two receipts which are written on the back of this letter?"

Mr. Bradford put on his spectacles, took the paper, and read it with deep attention. At length, raising his eyes, he fixed a look of mingled congratulation and surprise upon Arthur, saying, "I am much mistaken if you do not now possess the clue to the malady which has been destroying you, as well as the secret of its cure."

"The great God be praised!" exclaimed the young man, joining his hands fervently. "Oh! if this were indeed the case——But it is a happiness too great—too great!"

And he melted into tears. For all in a moment the premature winter of his life appeared suddenly to spring into vernal bloom again: the withered branches of his decaying existence seemed to clothe themselves abruptly with a renovated verdure;—hope—bright and brilliant hope—shed forth its radiant beams upon his head;—and he already felt as if he were treading the earth with the firm foot and the elastic step of a vigorous youthfulness, instead of creeping mournfully over its surface with the despondent manner of a caducity about to close in the sleep of death!

"Yes—it is as I have said!" cried the chemist in a joyous tone. "The one receipt is a slow—fatal—and mysterious poison: the other is its antidote. Oh! well indeed may the former be denominated the *Heir's Friend*: for anything more sure—more certain to effect a deadly purpose could not well be conceived. Never did the ingenuity of man accomplish so wonderful, but at the same time so horrible a combination as this? The uses and effects of each component part, viewed separately, are well known to the merest novice in chemical studies: but never would it strike any one to throw these ingredients together. Accident or the promptings of Satan must have been the origin of this infernal mixture."

"What colour would it be? and what taste would it have?" inquired Arthur, so overjoyed at the almost incredible good news which he had received that he could scarcely restrain his impatience to ask additional questions: for he longed to begin taking the antidote—he yearned also to assure his afflicted father that a change had manifested itself in him and that there was yet room to hope.

"The colour would be white—or rather, there would be no colour at all," responded the chemist "and the fluid would be utterly tasteless."

"And those remarks apply alike to the poison and the antidote?" exclaimed Arthur.

"Precisely so. But it must have been Providence that placed these secrets in your way, my dear Mr. Eaton," continued Bradford, pressing the young man's hand warmly, and even shedding tears—so deep was the interest now inspired within him towards one to whom heaven's mercy or else a marvellous accident had pointed out the issue leading from the path of death to the temple of salvation.

"My dear friend, I thank you most cordially for this sympathy and kind feeling on your part," responded Arthur, down whose cheeks the tears likewise fell thick and fast. "The hand of God is in this—and never, never shall I cease to adore His holy name. If I be indeed spared—if my cure should in reality be effected ——"

"It will be—it must be!" interrupted the chemist emphatically. "The bane is in your blood—the antidote is in your hands!"

"Then will I devote to good, and virtuous, and honourable purposes that existence which the Almighty has so miraculously vouchsafed to rescue from the jaws of an early grave," exclaimed Arthur Eaton, not uttering these words in the enthusiasm of a moment or in obedience to a passing impulse—but deeply and solemnly feeling their force and weighing their tendency.

"I am not superstitious," said the chemist, likewise adopting a serious tone: "but when I think of the condition in which you have been—in which you indeed still are,—*then*, when I reflect that some means, the nature whereof I seek not to learn, have opened to your knowledge the cause of your malady and placed in your hands the sure and certain method of its cure,—I do not hesitate to say that your affliction and your redemption will have been intended for purposes having their origin and destiny in the divine wisdom."

"Such will ever be my own sentiments," exclaimed Arthur. "But now," he added, pointing to the bottle which he had placed on the table when first entering the room, "will you be so kind as to tell me whether that fluid contains anything prejudicial to him who might drink it?"

Mr. Bradford forthwith proceeded to submit the contents of the bottle to several chemical tests; and while he was thus engaged, Arthur watched him with the deepest anxiety and most intense interest. Thus upwards of half-an-hour elapsed; and at the expiration of that interval, the chemist said in a solemn tone, "The water which that bottle contained was poisoned according to the receipt entitled the *Heir's Friend*."

"Then farewell to all confidence in the reading of the human physiognomy!" exclaimed Arthur, his thoughts instantly settling upon William Dudley. "But, no—I was wrong thus to speak," he observed hurriedly: "there are exceptions to all

rules—and I must continue to believe that the same Deity who created Man in his own image, made the countenance a reflex of the mind. This is the rule: the other is the exception. Mr. Bradford, I am deeply—deeply indebted to you for the trouble which you have taken and the interest you have manifested in my behalf. May I now request that you will prepare me the antidote, which is to restore me to health and happiness?"

"It will take me two hours to compound the mixture, Mr. Eaton," was the answer. "Shall I send it to your residence?"

"No: in the afternoon I will call for it. I do not wish that a single soul beneath my father's roof should learn that I am indebted to medicine for this miraculous resuscitation which is to take place. It must be believed that nature herself is working her own cure by means as mysterious as those which my friends imagine to be the cause of my malady."

Eaton then took his leave of the chemist, to whom he offered no pecuniary recompense. But he went straight to a goldsmith's in the same street;—and in the course of the day Mr. Bradford received a complete service of very handsome silver plate, which could not possibly have cost less than five hundred guineas.

CHAPTER XLIV

MRS. FITZHERBERT.

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon: and the Prince of Wales was seated at breakfast with a lady in one of the most elegant apartments of Carlton House.

The companion of the heir-apparent on this occasion was a woman of remarkable beauty. Her complexion was delicately fair—not of an insipid paleness, nor white as marble or as snow; but of a transparent living white such as the soft and velvet-like skin ought to be, and which no painter can imitate on his canvass. On each round cheek there appeared the tint of the rose, which could easily deepen, with excitement or animation, into a richer and a warmer glow.

Her hair was very light,—not flaxen—nor yellow—nor auburn;—but of that indescribable paleness which is nevertheless glossy and shining, and which, in the sun's rays or in the lustre of lamps, seems as if it were sprinkled with gold dust. She however wore it powdered, and arranged in a myriad curls: and although that style, borrowed from the Court of Louis XVI of France, was a disfigurement in nine cases out of ten, it appeared exquisitely becoming to the lady whom we are describing.

Her eyes were large, and of a light, clear, liquid blue—usually languishing and tender: but sometimes lighting up with an expression which commanded, or with a lustre which overawed. From a soul formed for love did those eyes borrow the sweetness that smiled from them; and more melting would they grow beneath the gaze of him to whom her heart was given.

Her nose was remarkable for its classic shape; and its beautifully finished outline imparted an air of inconceivable grace to the general contour of the countenance. Her mouth was full and ripe, but not coarse; and her teeth were perfect in evenness and brilliancy.

In stature she was not above the middle height and although her charms had expanded into the luxuriance of maturity, yet her figure had not lost its symmetry. The sweeping outlines of her robust arms, bare to the shoulders—the fulness but plump roundness of the bosom which a low dress more than half-revealed—the swan-like curvature of the proud neck—and the wavy development of the entire form,—all these constituted an assemblage of charms most suited to the taste of the libidinous Prince, and in which he rejoiced to revel.

This lady was Mrs. Fitzherbert.

She was now in her thirty-ninth year, but in all the glory of her charms—in all the splendour of her beauty. She had been twice married before she became acquainted with the heir-apparent: but she was without issue from either of those alliances. In religious faith she was a Roman Catholic, and was slightly tinged with bigotry: nevertheless, she was addicted to pleasure, fond of society, and not particularly scrupulous in her morals—as her amour with the Marquis of Bellois fully testified.

At the time of which we are writing, Mrs. Fitzherbert dwelt openly with the Prince of Wales. She had her suite of apartments in Carlton House, where she received her own friends and gave elegant entertainments;—and she likewise presided at the balls and soirées given by the heir-apparent himself. In every respect was she treated and looked upon as his wife, save in name: for it was always as *Mrs. Fitzherbert* that she was spoken of by his Royal Highness or addressed by others.

But to return to our narrative.

It was, as we have already said, about eleven o'clock in the forenoon; and the Prince of Wales was breakfasting with Mrs. Fitzherbert in one of her own rooms at Carlton House.

They had dismissed the attendants in order to converse without restraint: for it was evident by their manner that something had occurred to give them annoyance.

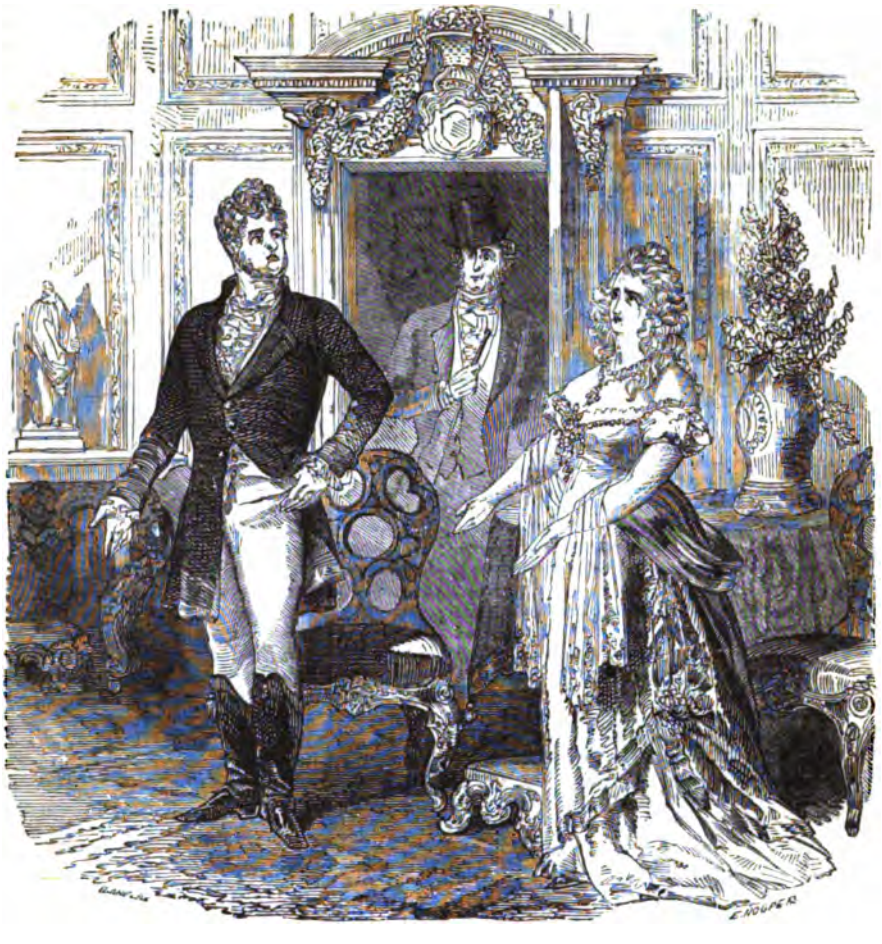
"And when did you hear of his Majesty's intention?" inquired the lady, after a long pause: and her voice, naturally soft and pleasing, was rendered perfectly melodious by the melancholy plaintiveness which now characterised it.

"Last night, my love," responded the Prince. "I had been to call on the Earl and Countess of Desborough, who have returned to town; and as I was returning home in my carriage I met a friend who was on horseback. He beckoned the coachman to stop, as he had something of importance to communicate: and he assured me in a hurried whisper at the carriage-window that the thing was the talk of the clubs. It appears that Ministers received yesterday morning a message from my august father, intimating his desire that such an alliance should take place;—a Cabinet Council was held in the afternoon;—and a few hours later the matter was known throughout the West End."

"And who was this friend that seems to have been the first to communicate so important a project to the personage principally concerned and interested in it?" asked Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Oh! you know him well enough, my dear," replied the Prince. "It was that kind-hearted, useful——"

"And good-for-nothing fellow Tim Meagles," added the lady, finishing the sentence of the heir-apparent for him—her brows contracting with dis-



pleasure at the same time. "I am sorry, George, that you are so fond of that individual's society."

"By God!" exclaimed the Prince, somewhat angrily: "I should not know very well how to do without him. And you must admit, my love," he added, in a milder tone, "that Mr. Meagles has always conducted himself with the utmost respect towards you. Indeed, I fancied that you were better pleased with him lately than you used to be; and upon the strength of that opinion I was foolish enough to tell him to call upon me in your apartments this morning. He received my instructions to glean all he could concerning this intended marriage——"

"Marriage!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance suddenly becoming flushed with indignation. "Surely, George, you do not dream that the project can ever be realized—that the design so secretly planned by your royal father can ever arrive at such an issue?"

"I am at *your* mercy, my dearest creature, answered the Prince.

"At *my* mercy!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now starting from her seat. "What! do you even for a single instant harbour the thought——"

"Silence, I implore you!" cried the heir-apparent, also rising from his chair. "We know not how easily we may be overheard! Be assured that I will do nothing without previously consulting you—that I will make as many sacrifices as I dare, short of my right to the crown——"

"And even *that* have you sworn to renounce sooner than act a perfidious part towards *me!*" interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of deep solemnity.

The Prince was about to reply, when the door opened, and Tim Meagles entered the room.

He instantly saw that there was something wrong: but he was too good a tactician to appear to notice it;—and, with a low obeisance to Mrs. Fitzherbert,

he took the hand which the Prince of Wales held out to him.

The lady returned his salutation with cold courtesy, and resumed her seat. The Prince threw himself upon a sofa, and invited Meagles to take a chair, inquiring at the same time whether he had breakfasted.

"Yes—hours ago," was the answer: "and since then I have been gathering all the intelligence I could scrape together respecting——"

He stopped, and glanced towards the lady.

"You may continue, sir," said Mrs. Fitzherbert. "His Royal Highness has no secrets with me," she added in a dignified manner.

"It is all true—just as I told you," proceeded Meagles, addressing himself to the Prince. "The King has communicated to the Ministers his desire that your Royal Highness should espouse the Princess Caroline of Brunswick: the Cabinet assembled yesterday afternoon and discussed the question;—and it was agreed to retain the affair a secret for a short time longer. But somehow or another the rumour got afloat in the evening—and now it is known to be correct."

"Upon my honour," exclaimed the Prince, indignantly, "my august father has a magnificent notion of the way to cater for his son's happiness;—and Mr. Pitt and his friends in the Cabinet dispose of the destinies of the heir-apparent to the throne with as much coolness as a magistrate displays when he commits a vagrant to the House of Correction."

"It will be your fault if you submit tamely to these indignities," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, emphatically. "The contemplated alliance becomes the talk of the town even before the faintest hint has been dropped to yourself."

"It is too bad," returned the Prince. "But what more have you heard, Meagles? Tell us everything, and without reserve: Mrs. Fitzherbert will be all the better pleased with you."

"There is a report that your Royal Highness's private affairs were also discussed yesterday at the Cabinet Council," said Tim: "and I know that the rumour is correct."

"What was mooted?—and how are you aware that the story is true?" demanded the Prince, with feverish impatience, and with a hasty glance at Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"In the first place," answered Meagles, "it is said that Mr. Pitt proposed to his colleagues a scheme for the settlement of the debts contracted by your Royal Highness, and which project will be submitted to Parliament when it meets next month. Secondly, I am sure that such was the case, because the editor of the Government evening paper is an intimate friend of mine; and I have been with him this morning. There'll appear an article, in the shape of what may be termed a '*feeler*,' in to-night's edition."

"Even the very scrubs of the press receive such important intelligence earlier than I," exclaimed the Prince, in a tone which proved how deeply he was mortified. "It is the most underhand thing I ever knew in all my life."

"I can assure you that my friend Percy Booth, the editor, is no scrub," said Meagles, somewhat annoyed at the supercilious manner in which his Royal Highness spoke of the gentlemen of the press collectively, and consequently of him individually. "He is a fine fellow—will do a good action—sings a capital song—and is a famous hand with the gloves."

"No insult was intended to your friend, sir," observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose sensitiveness was shocked at the idea of a man's amiable qualities being summed up in the singing of bacchanalian airs and in pugilistic skilfulness.

"So much the better, madam," said Meagles, who saw that Mrs. Fitzherbert could barely tolerate his presence: and, by way of retaliation, he remarked, "By the bye, your Royal Highness will be delighted with a certain French nobleman who longs to be presented to you. He is a refugee——"

"Ah! indeed," exclaimed the heir-apparent, fancying that Meagles was adopting this indirect mode of letting him know that he had discovered another rich emigrant, who, like the Marquis of St. Croix, would be glad to entrust his money to the princely keeping. "I shall be pleased to show suitable attention to any French nobleman who has suffered through devotion to his Sovereign. What is the name of your new foreign acquaintance?"

"The Marquis of Bellois," responded Meagles,—and he threw a furtive glance towards Mrs. Fitzherbert to notice the effect which the mention of this name would have upon her.

She turned ashy pale, and for an instant appeared to reel upon her chair, as if seized with a sudden vertigo: but recovering herself the next moment, she darted a rapid look at Meagles, to ascertain whether he had any sinister meaning in thus introducing the name of that nobleman.

Their eyes met, and were instantaneously averted;—and while the lady affected to be arranging her brooch, Meagles glanced towards the Prince. His Royal Highness had not observed the momentary confusion on the part of Mrs. Fitzherbert, nor the rapid looks that followed it: for he had fallen into a profound reverie, the matrimonial project devised by his father having sorely troubled him.

"Yes," continued Meagles, who was determined to convince Mrs. Fitzherbert that she must not hope to domineer over him or treat him with contempt in future,—"this Marquis of Bellois is a very nice man, and must have been uncommonly handsome a few years ago. But I am afraid he is rather dissipated—indeed, that he is given to gambling. If so, he will find plenty of English sharks ready to prey upon him."

"We were discussing more important matters, I think, Mr. Meagles," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, who had now recovered her self-possession: for a few moments' reflection had led her to believe—or rather to flatter herself—that the Marquis of Bellois was too high-minded and generous a man to have betrayed her secret to Mr. Timothy Meagles.

"We will return to the former topic, madam, since such is your pleasure," observed this individual. "But, by the bye, the Marquis informed me that he had the honour of becoming acquainted with you, during your residence at Plombiers, and afterwards in Paris, several years ago."

An ice-bolt seemed to shoot through the heart of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as Tim Meagles uttered these words in a measured tone, and with his gaze fixed intently upon her countenance. She felt that she was once more turning deadly pale—that her lips quivered—

that the perspiration burst forth upon her brow: for it was now impossible to close her eyes to the fact that the Marquis de Bellois *had* betrayed her, and that Mr. Meagles was the depository of the terrible secret of her amour with that nobleman.

Starting in her chair, as if awakening from a hideous dream, she threw an affrighted glance towards the Prince: but he was still buried in thought, and had not observed her changing countenance nor her agitated manner. Considerably relieved, Mrs. Fitzherbert rose from her seat; and approaching Meagles, who stood up as she thus advanced towards him, she said, "For your devotion to the Prince I sincerely thank you. For the good offices which you have occasionally performed for me, at the request of his Royal Highness, I also tender you my gratitude. I did not know your good disposition thoroughly until this morning: but his Royal Highness has quite effaced any disagreeable impressions which misrepresentations may have made upon my mind; —and henceforth we will be friends, Mr. Meagles."

Having uttered these words in her blandest tones, assuming at the same time her most enchanting smiles, the lady extended her hand with an apparent frankness, which did not however for a single moment deceive the individual to whom it was proffered.

Nevertheless, he had no inclination to continue, at least for the present, the little warfare which he had so successfully commenced. The triumph was his own: he had humbled the haughty beauty;—nay, more—he had convinced her that she was in his power;—and he was satisfied. For he was very far from being naturally spiteful: but he could not endure to be treated with contumely or indifference.

Accepting, therefore, the fair hand that was tendered with such seeming grace, he said significantly, "It will be your own fault, madam, if I ever become your enemy;"—and thus terminated this little incident which had at one time overwhelmed Mrs. Fitzherbert with the most crushing fears.

The Prince, who had not observed anything of all this, was now awakened from his deep reverie by some remark which the lady addressed to him; and the discourse again turned on the matrimonial project that had been set afloat at the Court and in the Cabinet.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE BALL.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed from the date of the incidents just recorded; and at eight o'clock, on a damp and inclement evening, carriages began to arrive one after another in rapid succession, at the mansion of Lord Marchmont in Hanover Square. From the windows of the spacious dwelling, in spite of the rich curtains drawn within, poured floods of mellowed light; and soon the sounds of music came floating forth upon the air.

Lord Marchmont gave a grand ball that evening. So evident an improvement had taken place in the health of his only son and heir, the Hon. Mr. Eaton, that the old nobleman's heart had become accessible to joy once more;—and his elegant saloons were accordingly thrown open to the *élite* of the fashion and aristocracy at the West End.

Though the weather was so ungenial without, and the poor shivering beggar was forced to wrap his rags more closely around him, yet within the vast and lofty rooms of that splendid mansion, all was brilliant and delightful. The air was warm and perfumed: the lustre of innumerable lamps and magnificent chandeliers was reflected in the immense mirrors, which also multiplied the elegant and beauteous forms that were now assembling;—stars shone on the breasts of nobles, and diamonds sparkled on the brows of charming ladies. The atmosphere was harmonious with the music of many instruments and the melody of many soft voices;—and every countenance appeared radiant with happiness.

Lord Marchmont was an old man, with features naturally stern and haughty in expression, but which could relax into smiles on such occasions as the present. His cheeks were furrowed with wrinkles, and his form was bowed with the weight of years. yet was there in his step, his air, and his conversation, all that indomitable pride which seems so inveterate a characteristic of the English aristocracy,—a pride which buoys them up with the insensate hope that even as their ancestors have worn coronets and rolled in riches for centuries past, so will their descendants be enabled to perpetuate that same hereditary usurpation of honours and of gold for centuries to come.

The Hon. Mr. Eaton was certainly much improved in appearance. Though still very pale, thin, and feeble, he was nevertheless in far better spirits than he had been for months before; and the feverish lustre of his eyes had partially subsided into a more natural and healthy appearance. His step was more elastic—his tread more assured;—and he could smile—yes, with an unfeigned gaiety—upon those with whom he stopped to converse for a few minutes as he passed through the rooms, arm-in-arm with his father, to welcome the numerous guests.

"I do not see Mr. Clarendon," said Arthur to Lord Marchmont, as they entered the principal saloon, having traversed all those which led to it, and which were thronged with the gay and brilliant assemblage. "Are you sure that our card of invitation was delivered at the right address?—for you know, dear father, that he has removed to Cavendish Square."

"I am not only certain that the card reached him," replied Lord Marchmont; "but also that he will be here with his daughters. For, observing during the last few days that you expressed so much anxiety to see them all here this evening, I called at their house in Cavendish Square yesterday afternoon ——"

"And they promised to honour us with their presence?" exclaimed Arthur, with eagerness.

"Yes. But wherefore, my dear boy, are you so desirous to see them?" asked Lord Marchmont, in a low tone. "Now that so signal a change has taken place in your health, and that I may felicitate myself upon the certainty of my coronet passing to you, I rather repent having taken Mr. Clarendon by the hand."

"My dear father," said the young man, stopping short and gazing intently upon the old peer's countenance,—"you know not what pain you give me when you speak thus. It is precisely because Mr. Clarendon and his daughters had for years—indeed, until within the last three or four weeks—been treated with such cruel neglect and cold indifference on our part, that I am determined to make all the atonement that lies in my power. Therefore shall I show them the most marked attention;—and if you really value

my health and happiness, dear father," he added in a lower but more impressive tone,—"you will aid me in thus convincing them that they are truly welcome here, not as mere guests—but as members of the family."

"You know, my dear boy, that I will do anything to bring back the smiles to your countenance," said the old peer. "It was to give you pleasure that I called on the Clarendons yesterday to insist upon their coming to-night. They had already intended to accept our invitation, and had written the usual answer, which must however have miscarried. But there they are: let us hasten to welcome them."

As Lord Marchmont spoke, Mr. Clarendon entered the saloon, Octavia leaning on his right arm and Pauline on his left. Never had those two young ladies appeared to greater advantage: there was something alike noble and ravishing in their splendid style of beauty. Dressed with taste and elegance, and carrying themselves with a modest dignity and an indescribable grace, they seemed to have been born and nurtured in that sphere of fashion which they were indeed now entering for the first time.

The eyes of all present in that spacious apartment were fixed upon these charming girls as they made their appearance. The ladies could not help paying them the tacit compliment of admiration; and the nobles and gentlemen murmured to each other the praises which sprang to their lips as their looks became rivetted on Mr. Clarendon's daughters.

In a few moments they were accosted by Lord Marchmont and the Hon. Mr. Eaton. The latter was duly presented by his father to the young ladies, who had expected to receive a cold, haughty, and reserved courtesy from him, and who were therefore highly delighted and most agreeably disappointed by the welcome which he gave them.

Shaking them cordially by the hand, he said, "My dear cousins, you must think me very unkind not to have called upon you. You may even imagine that I was not eager to make your acquaintance. But you would do me a serious injustice were you to entertain such an impression. The truth is, I am only beginning to recover from a long and severe malady, as your excellent father has doubtless informed you; and I have been compelled to remain at home during the last fortnight in consequence of the inclement weather. Then, again, I knew that you were occupied in removing to your new residence; and I am well aware that ladies do not like to be disturbed when thus engaged. Now, however, that my health is greatly improving and that you are doubtless settled by this time in Cavendish Square, I promise myself the pleasure of visiting you frequently. Come—we will leave your father to converse with mine, while I conduct you to seats."

And having thus addressed Octavia and Pauline in the most affable manner, and with the familiarity of a relation instead of the reserved politeness of a mere friend—much less with the cold reserve of a stranger—he gave each an arm and led them slowly through the suite of drawing-rooms.

"Now that I hope I have made my peace with you, charming cousins, for not calling upon you," resumed Eaton, who in reality had abstained from visiting them hitherto in order that he might afford them a more decided proof of his good feeling by paying them a marked attention in the presence of the fashion and rank assembled on the present occasion—"and now that I have unburthened myself of all adequate apologies on that point," he continued gaily, "I must give you due notice that I am likely to become a very troublesome visitor at your house. For I shall observe no cold ceremony: such formality is ridiculous between relatives. Therefore I shall intrude myself on you when the humour takes me—and while you are busied with your drawing or your embroidery, I shall read to you. Or else you shall treat me to some music now and then: for I am sure you are proficients in that art. Now, tell me—shall I be welcome on such terms?"

"We shall always be delighted to see you, Mr. Eaton," answered Octavia, who, as well as her sister, was as much charmed as amazed by the warm friendship and unaffected cordiality which their relative demonstrated towards them.

"Nay—if you call me *Mr. Eaton*," he instantly observed, "I shall think that you mean to treat me as any other visitor. We are cousins—and I have already declared that ceremony must not exist between us. Oh! you do not know how many inquiries I have made concerning you. I am well aware that your Christian names are Octavia and Pauline; and you are the elder—therefore your name is Octavia;—and yours is Pauline," he added, looking first at the sister who leant on his right arm, and then at the one who was supported on his left. "Henceforth I shall call you Octavia and Pauline—and you will have the kindness to call me Arthur—or I shall very soon quarrel with you both, I can assure you."

"At least you will allow us to thank you, Arthur, for your generous kindness towards us," said Pauline.

"No—indeed I will not," he answered immediately, and with a playful smile upon his countenance. "It would be as if I were affecting a sentiment which I do not in reality feel. But the dancing is about to commence, my charming cousins—and I must find you suitable partners. I dare not venture upon a quadrille at present: otherwise I would open the ball with you, Octavia. But I shall conduct you both to seats, and leave you for a few minutes; you will however speedily see me again."

Thus speaking, he escorted the two young ladies to a sofa; and then, mingling with the brilliant assembly thronging the room to which he had thus led them, he selected a handsome young nobleman, with whom he was intimately acquainted, as a partner for Octavia. Having introduced them to each other, he again looked around; and his eyes fell upon Lord Florimel, who was at that moment entering the room. Pauline, from the place where she sate, simultaneously recognised the young peer whose image dwelt in her bosom; and when she saw Arthur Eaton accost him, shake him familiarly by the hand, and then advance down the saloon leaning on his arm, her heart fluttered with indescribable emotions of pleasure.

But she had time to compose her countenance ere Lord Florimel stood before her; and he also, by a powerful effort, subdued the mingled joy and amazement which seized upon him when he thus found himself in the presence of the charming girl whom he had never once forgotten since that memorable night which he passed at Paradise Villa.

In the meantime Octavia had been led away by her partner to join the dance; and the reader may conceive the surprise and momentary confusion

which she experienced when she beheld her sister leaning on the arm of Lord Florimel, as they took their places in the same quadrille. But almost immediately the music commenced; and, feeling convinced that Florimel was a man of honour who would not betray her secret, Octavia recovered her self-possession and yielded herself up to the pleasing excitement of the dance.

"At length we meet again, dear Pauline," said Lord Florimel in a low tone to his beautiful partner, when the arrangements of the quadrille allowed them leisure to converse. "I have been anxiously seeking the means of obtaining an introduction to your father: but your cousin Eaton was too unwell to leave home—and Lord Marchmont has been so solicitous on account of his son's health, that I found myself completely baffled."

"Were they aware that your lordship desired to be presented to us?" asked Pauline, casting down her eyes and blushing beneath the tender looks which her partner threw upon her.

"No—assuredly not," was his instantaneous reply. "They would naturally have imagined that I must have some hidden motive in requesting their agency to introduce me to you. But if I had been able to induce one of them to walk or ride out with me, I should have managed the matter in some way or another. However, we have met at last—I am now formally presented to you—and that is the essential. But tell me, dearest Pauline—are you pleased, on your side, that this has happened?"

"Did I appear very much annoyed when I saw your lordship approaching with Mr. Eaton just now?" said Pauline, raising her head and meeting his eyes with a smiling countenance.

"But wherefore do you call me by the cold title of *lordship*?" asked Florimel.

"Were we alone together—or at a greater distance from those who might now overhear us—I should call you *Gabriel*," answered Pauline. "I am not fickle nor capricious," she added, in a low tone; "and you will not find me to-morrow different from what I am to-night. Am I to hope that it is the same with you?" she said, again bending upon him a look which, though almost immediately averted again, was eloquent with the silent language of love.

"Did I not assure you, ere we parted on that memorable night to which for many reasons I blush to allude, and upon which I must nevertheless always restrospect with pleasure, inasmuch as it not only made me acquainted with you, but gave me in a few hours a deeper insight into your character than years of ordinary friendship could have afforded,—did I not then assure you, dearest Pauline," demanded the young nobleman, "that you had worked a great and signal change within me?—did I not declare that I had suddenly learnt to love you with an affection unknown to me before?"

"Yes," murmured the maiden: "and have you not once repented of those assurances during the interval which has elapsed since they were given?"

"Not once — I solemnly assure you, Pauline," answered Lord Florimel, in a tone of profound sincerity. "Can you not believe me? Perhaps you have heard that I am wild and fickle; but is there not a period in every man's life when circumstances stamp his character with stability?—and young as I am may not that hour have been proclaimed by the time-piece of my destiny?"

"I hope and believe so," answered Pauline: "otherwise we should not now be conversing thus familiarly."

"And thus tenderly," rejoined Florimel, as he took her hand to lead her again into the maze of the dance.

The figure of the quadrille now compelled the young nobleman and his partner to pass near the spot where Octavia stood: but he did not seem to recognise her—for inasmuch as, to all appearances, he had only that evening been introduced for the first time to Pauline, it would have seemed strange were he to acknowledge her sister as a previous acquaintance. For Arthur Eaton was seated at a short distance, watching the dancers: and Lord Marchmont and Mr. Clarendon were standing on the threshold of the room, conversing together, and likewise regarding the progress of the quadrille.

But when the dance was over, and Florimel had conducted Pauline to a seat, Octavia was escorted back by her own partner to her sister's side: and then the young nobleman requested the honour of Octavia's hand for the next quadrille. Both the young ladies appreciated all the delicacy and good taste which thus characterised Florimel's conduct; and while the elder darted upon him a look of grateful acknowledgment, the younger felt that she loved him more, if possible, than ever.

During the time that Florimel and Octavia now danced together, not a word fell from his lips respecting the past. He never once alluded to the incidents of that morning when he conducted her home to Paradise Villa: but he told her, in a cordial manner, "that he intended to become a frequent visitor in Cavendish Square, having already received the permission of Miss Pauline to that effect." To this remark Octavia replied by an emphatic assurance that he would always be welcome; and thus was it that the young nobleman, by his considerate behaviour, not only convinced the young lady that her secret was deemed by him to be inviolable, but that his sentiments towards her sister were of the most honourable character.

In fact, throughout the entire evening, he paid a marked attention to Pauline. When the sisters were not engaged in the dance, he remained in conversation with them; and it was a pleasing spectacle to behold that group consisting of two of the most charming creatures on whom nature ever lavished her choicest gifts, and that young man so faultless in the femininely handsome cast of his features and the delicate symmetry of his form.

When the supper-rooms were thrown open, the Hon. Mr. Eaton escorted Octavia and Florimel gave his arm to Pauline to the luxuriously spread table; and when the hour of separation at length arrived, the sisters returned home delighted with the attentions which they had received on the occasion of their first appearance in the fashionable world.

CHAPTER XLVI.

JULIA.—MR. GRUMLEY.

It was about six o'clock in the evening of the day following the ball at Lord Marchmont's residence, that Mrs. Page, dressed in very mean attire, entered Thacker's Court, which was the name of that place where the house that she used to live in was situated. But instead of stopping at her own late abode, which

was now empty and silent, she knocked at the door of the adjoining premises; and her summons was immediately answered by the man Briggs.

"Ah! Julia my dear," he exclaimed, the moment that the light which he held in his hand flashed upon her countenance: "how d'ye do? I am quite delighted to see you. Walk in."

The young woman instantly accepted the invitation, and followed Briggs into his parlour, where she sate down. He insisted upon her laying aside her cloak and bonnet; and when he observed that she was so poorly dressed, he exclaimed, "Why, the world doesn't seem to jog well with you, Julia. Take a drop of something to console you—and tell me what you've been doing with yourself since I saw you last."

Suiting the action to the word, Briggs filled a glass with gin, which he handed to Mrs. Page; and when she had imbibed the dram, he indulged himself in one, drinking to her "better luck."

"Let me see," he continued, taking a seat, and scratching the enormous wen upon his hideous head, —"when was it that I saw you last? Oh! about a fortnight ago, when you came to bury your poor father. You told me then that you had hopes of obtaining a situation, and you seemed in very good spirits. What's happened since?"

"Oh! disappointment—nothing but disappointment," answered Julia, assuming a tone and air of deep vexation: for as Briggs entertained not the slightest idea relative to her marriage, nor even suspected that she was acquainted with Page, she had her own reasons for not enlightening him upon that head. "I have failed in all my endeavours to do anything honest to obtain a livelihood," she added; "and that's the reason I am here now."

"Why—what do you suppose I can do for you, Julia?" demanded the man.

"Well, I don't know," she answered. "But I thought that perhaps you could find some means of making me useful. You've a great many acquaintances: there's the Magsman—and Carrotty Poll—and the Gallows' Widow—and the Big Beggarman—and the Kinchin Grand——"

"Oh! yes—that's all very good!" exclaimed Briggs. "But you know I'm more of a servant to the Magsman, than a master. Besides, you had an opportunity of belonging to us, if you'd liked, long ago: but you always seemed to treat us so coolly——"

"Ah! that was when my father was alive and I didn't think I should ever want your assistance," replied Julia. "But I was wrong—very wrong to act in that manner; and now I'm sorry for it. I'd do anything if you'd only forgive me. The fact is, I'm houseless and penniless," she added, bursting into tears; "and if you don't do something for me, I must go and drown myself in the river."

"Come—leave off crying, there's a dear," said Briggs, in a tone which he endeavoured to render as consolatory as possible. "We won't let you starve. But I really thought you had gone upon the town."

"I'd sooner destroy myself at once—for that's what I dread," exclaimed Julia. "No—no: I'll never do that! You suppose that because I used to go with young men when I lived next door, that I must be a thorough bad one. But if I had my fancies, I never was a prostitute—and never will be."

"Well, well—I didn't mean to annoy you, Julia. You know that we're none of us very particular—I mean them that frequents this house; and so I spoke accordingly. But tell me, Julia—did your father leave you without a penny piece?" demanded the man.

"Without more than was enough to bury him in the wretched way that you saw," answered the young woman.

"And all his papers?" continued Briggs, interrogatively.

"I found none—although I looked everywhere," was the reply.

"Nor yet any of those pretty shiners, you know?"

"Not a single one."

"Well—that's a pity!" exclaimed the man. "I really thought the old fellow must have had a store of them somewhere or another."

"I dug up the cellar—hunted everywhere—up chimneys, in dark corners, and even in the roof," responded Julia: "but I could find nothing."

"It's a bore about the papers being lost," said Briggs: "because, according to all accounts, some of them must have been of value."

"Ah! I wish I had them," exclaimed the young woman: "I should not perhaps be as unhappy as I am now. But can you do anything for me?—is there no way in which I can possibly assist you in any of your plans? I would serve you faithfully——"

"Well, the truth is that we can always make use of a person like you," interrupted Briggs. "But, don't you see, we're obliged to be so very particular and cautious."

"Quite right," returned Julia. "At the same time you are well aware that I am tolerably trustworthy: for a good many of your secrets are already known to me—all your transactions with my late father—especially the business with the Aylesbury bankers: and yet I never split upon you—I'd cut my head off sooner."

"Well, I think you would, Julia," observed Briggs, approvingly. "Come—I'll undertake to admit you into our body; and I dare say the Magsman won't be angry with me for doing it of my own accord. So make yourself comfortable. He'll be here to-night at twelve punctually: and so will the Gallows' Widow and the Big Beggarman. They've got a little business to settle with those very Aylesbury bankers you was a-talking of."

"What! Mr. Martin and Mr. Ramsey?" exclaimed Julia.

"Just so. To tell you the truth, Mr. Ramsey is in this house at present—up-stairs at this very moment," answered Briggs, in a confidential tone. "He has been here this fortnight, and is only just recovered from a very severe illness. In fact, he was half-drowned—and the Magsman brought him here in a hackney-coach one night, from the Mariners' Arms—that public-house, you know, down by Execution Dock."

"I know it well enough," returned Julia. "Poor gentleman! was it an accident, then?"

"Why—not exactly," answered Briggs, with a coarse chuckle. "The fact is, he and the Big Beggarman and some others were in a boat together—and, as he had a bag of gold with him, the Beggarman gave him a shove overboard. But he was picked up by another party, and taken to the Mariners' Arms. There the Magsman went, disguised as a gentleman—a slap-up Bond Street swell—and got him away. Since then Ramsey has forgiven

the Beggarman for the little *accident*," added Briggs, with a significant look;—"for the fact is, the Aylesbury bankers can't very well do without our assistance at this moment."

"Then Mr. Ramsey has quite recovered?" said Julia.

"Oh! quite. But he considers it safe to remain here for a day or two longer—particularly as Mr. Martin is in town and can come and consult with him when it's necessary," continued Briggs. "Martin will be here to-night at twelve;—and we shall have a regular council of war."

At this moment there was an impatient knock at the street-door; and Briggs, bidding Julia not to disturb herself, hastened to answer the summons.

"Ah! Mr. Martin—is that you?" said the man, surprised at the appearance of the banker several hours before the appointed time. "Has anything happened? But walk in."

And Briggs led the way into the parlour where Julia was seated.

"Mr. Martin drew back on perceiving a strange woman: but Briggs hastened to observe, "It's all right, sir. She's one of our party—and you may speak before her."

The Aylesbury banker, who was a man well stricken in years and of a most respectable exterior, threw himself upon a chair: for he was evidently exhausted;—and, laying aside his hat and cloak, he said, "Is Mr. Ramsey above?"

"He is, sir. Shall I call him down?" asked Briggs.

Martin nodded an assent; and the man immediately summoned Ramsey to the parlour.

"This young woman is the daughter of old Lightfoot, who's dead," said Briggs; "and therefore we need have no secrets from her."

"Has anything happened?" demanded Ramsey, with feverish impatience, and addressing himself to his partner. "You look care-worn—anxious—annoyed——"

"Annoyed indeed!" exclaimed Martin, in a tone of despair: then, instantly recovering his self-possession by a violent effort, he said, "Sir Richard Stamford is in London!"

"Ah! then he is about to open the campaign against us," said Ramsey, a dark cloud coming over his handsome countenance, which was pale through recent illness and much anxiety. "He must be conscious of his power—he must possess some weapons which we do not suspect: or he would not venture in the metropolis, with the reward for his apprehension hanging over his head."

"Doubtless he has received from his wife a confession of all *she* knew," answered Martin, solemnly.

"No—no—I would stake my existence that she would not betray *me*," exclaimed Ramsey. "Having survived the blow which she inflicted on herself—and with every chance of recovering——"

"You are talking at random," interrupted Martin, impatiently. "She is dead!"

"Dead!" ejaculated Ramsey. "When did she die?—how have you learnt this fact?"

"She died the day before yesterday—early in the morning," answered Martin; "and the fact is recorded in the journals of this date."

"Then in her last moments may she have confessed!" murmured Ramsey. "Fool that I was to entrust her with so many of our secrets! But where did you see Sir Richard Stamford?—or how do you know that he is in London?"

"Because I *have* seen him," responded the senior partner. "I was coming out of a coffee-house in Blackman Street, Borough, where I had just read in the newspapers an account of Lady Stamford's death—when I saw Sir Richard Stamford enter a house not far from St. George's Church. He did not perceive me—and I waited about for some time to see if he came out again; as in that case, I should have knocked at the door and asked if he lived there. But he did not re-appear—and, my anxiety increasing to such a pitch that it became intolerable, I hastened hither to tell you what occurred."

"Well, at all events we have obtained a clue to his residence, or else to a house which he is in the habit of visiting," said Ramsey.

"An idea strikes me!" ejaculated Briggs. "It is of the utmost importance, for the plan which will be settled upon to-night, that we should find out whether the baronet *does* live at that house which you saw him enter. In any case, we must learn who and what the people are that live there: because, if we could obtain admission by fair means anyhow," he added, sinking his voice to a low and mysterious whisper, "we could do the work easy enough. What do you say?"

"Your plan is excellent," answered Ramsey. "But who can go and make the necessary inquiries? Some trustworthy and intelligent person——"

"Julia, you will undertake this mission?" interrupted Briggs, turning suddenly towards the young woman, who, though affecting to be leaning in a listless manner over the fire, had not lost a single word of the preceding conversation.

"What?" she exclaimed, raising her head and looking towards Briggs. "Did you speak to me?"

"Yes: I have something for you to do immediately:" then, putting money into her hand, he said, "You will go to the nearest stand and take a coach. Drive over into Blackman Street—and at a house which this gentleman," continued Briggs, pointing to Martin, "will describe to you, you must ascertain whether a certain Sir Richard Stamford lives there—and, if not, who does occupy the place. Endeavour to get into conversation with the servant, or the landlady—or whoever you may see——"

"I shall know how to manage it," observed Julia, in her quiet way. "Where is this house, sir?—and what number is it?"

Mr. Martin described the dwelling with accuracy.

"And you will be sure to return by twelve to-night at latest," said Briggs, impressively.

"I shall not fail you," answered Julia.

She then took her departure, and hastened to Tower Hill, whence a hackney-coach conveyed her over London Bridge to the lodgings which her husband and herself occupied in Blackman Street.

On ascending to the parlour she found Sir Richard Stamford in earnest conversation with Mr. Page: but the moment that she entered, they both turned looks of anxious inquiry upon her.

"I have succeeded—fully succeeded," observed Julia, as she laid aside her bonnet and cloak. "To-night the whole gang will be in your power—not even excepting Martin and Ramsey."

"God be thanked!" exclaimed the baronet, who was in deep mourning, and whose features were haggard and care-worn. "But how have you contrived, my good Mrs. Page, to ascertain sufficient to lead you to the adoption of this belief."

"We have already told you not to ask us how or by what means I could insinuate myself into the councils of those villains," replied Julia: "you see, sir, that when I suggested that it would be worth while for me to make the experiment, I was not far wrong. Ramsey is staying at Briggs's house, where he has been lying ill. Martin came in while I was there——"

"I knew that he was in London," exclaimed Sir Richard. "You see, Mr. Page, that the information I received at Aylesbury was quite correct."

"Mr. Martin came to report to Mr. Ramsey the circumstance of Lady Stamford's death, which he has read in the papers of this morning," continued Julia; "and they are now afraid that she may have made certain confessions to you."

"And their fears are justified," observed Sir Richard: "for, as I have already told you, my poor penitent wife avowed everything ere she breathed her last."

"What more have you ascertained, my dear?" demanded Page of his wife.

"Mr. Martin, on coming out of the coffee-shop," she replied, "saw Sir Richard Stamford enter this very house: and would you believe it—I am actually sent over as a spy to ascertain whether he lives here, and if not, who he comes to visit. Oh! you should have seen how well I kept my countenance while receiving these instructions and a description of the exterior of the house which I knew so much better than them."

"Excellent!" cried Page, rubbing his hands. "What more?"

"The villains are to hold a grand council to-night at twelve o'clock," continued Julia. "The Magsman, the Big Beggarman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Martin, and Ramsey will all be there—and your death, sir, will be resolved upon, I have no doubt from what the miscreants let drop," she added, turning towards the baronet.

"We will see how far they can succeed in their diabolical aims," observed Sir Richard. "Mrs. Page, I thank you most sincerely for the immense service which you have rendered me: but words are nothing—deeds shall prove my gratitude. Thank God! my affairs are far from being so desperate as I at first anticipated—and I shall be a wealthy man again. But my character must be thoroughly and completely cleared."

"It will be, my dear sir—it will be," exclaimed Page. "I told you so when we were in the dungeon together, and when you had not one tithe of the proofs of innocence which you possess now. But have you anything else to tell us, Julia my love?"

"Yes—one little incident," she answered. "I am to be back there, in Thacker's Court, by twelve o'clock, and report the results of my inquiries."

"Ah! we must see about that part of the business," said Page. "You're too useful and too precious, my dear, to put your life in jeopardy."

"I am not afraid," returned his wife, coolly; "and it may be that by going back to them again I can assist in their capture."

"This is a point on which Mr. Grumley must decide," said Page. "Let us now take a coach and be off to Bow Street. You are sure that Grumley will be there, Sir Richard?"

"When I explained in private to the magistrate this morning all the circumstances of my case, and the hope which I entertained of being enabled to place an entire gang of villains in the hands of justice," responded Sir Richard, "he ordered the head officer to remain at my disposal; and I made an appointment with the man to see him this evening."

"Ah! that's Grumley — Peter Grumley," said Page: "he's a famous thief-taker and very fond of a drop of drink, I believe. But we will be off now Come, Julia dear, put on another gown and throw away that wretched rag."

"Not if I'm to go back to Briggs's house," answered the young woman. "It was my miserable appearance that helped me to make out such a good tale to the fellow that he really pitied me at one time. I will keep on this gown, and resume this old bonnet and cloak, in case of need."

"Well—just as you like," said Page. "Come—we have no time to lose."

And the trio sallied forth together, Mr. Page and Sir Richard having enveloped themselves in thier cloaks, and Julia taking with her the latch-key belonging to the front door. A hackney-coach conveyed them to Bow Street, where they knocked at the private door of the Police-Office; and the summons was shortly answered by Mr. Peter Grumley himself. Sir Richard Stamford mentioned his name: and that functionary instantly conducted the party into a room where a candle was burning upon the table. A pewter-pot on the mantel-piece and the pipe which the famous thief-taker held in his hand, showed that he had been enjoying himself by the cheerful fire sparkling in the grate.

"Sit down," he said, as he closed the door of the dingy-looking and dirty apartment. "But I know you, my good sir," he exclaimed, fixing his eyes in a searching manner on the ex-traveller for the firm of Hodson and Morley: "your name's down in my books—and it's Page too. I recollect now. Ah! that little affair of our'n was a failur' some short time back," he added, sinking at the same moment into a huge black leathern chair studded with brass nails.

"But it shan't be a failure to-night, Mr. Grumley," observed Page: "and what's more, it's some of the very same people that we mean to put into your clutches."

"Ah! what—the Magsman?" said the thief-taker, puffing his pipe in a leisurely, comfortable manner, and then burying a considerable portion of his face in the pewter-pot.

"You've hit the right nail on the head, old fellow," exclaimed Mr. Page, chuckling and rubbing his hands gleefully.

"And who's this young o'oman?" asked Grumley, taking the pipe from his mouth and waving it towards Julia.

"My wife, sir—my wife, I beg to inform you," returned Page, drawing himself up in a stately manner. "But you musn't judge of her by the costume which she now wears. I admit that it is not elegant—I will allow that it is not becoming, Mr. Grumley: but let me tell you that it is assumed for a particular purpose," he added, placing his fore-finger slily against his nose, while his sharp countenance assumed a particularly sapient expression.

"Oh! I 'spose it's a plant, then?" observed the officer, with characteristic coolness, as he slowly rolled himself round in the huge chair so as to be enabled to enjoy a good long stare at Mrs. Page.

"A what did you say?" demanded the husband, bristling up under the impression that some insulting epithet had been applied to his wife.

"Now don't be a fool, Page," said Julia. "I know what he means. Yes, Mr. Grumley, it *is* a plant—a regular sell;—and without entering into any particulars, I must have you to know that I can insinuate myself when I choose into the company of the Magsman and his crew. I'm to be with them at midnight—or a little before: that is to say, if you think that by going amongst them I can do any good. If not, I shall of course stay away."

"Let's hear a little more about the matter, ma'am, if you please," observed the officer: then, withdrawing the pipe from his mouth and winking his right eye at Page, he added, "You ought to be proud of your good lady, sir—for she's a sharp 'un"

"Well, I am proud of her," said the ex-traveller, "She has managed this matter capitally as far as it goes. There 'll be the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Ramsey, and Martin, all assembled together to-night at twelve o'clock—a precious good haul of fish for your net, Mr. Grumley."

"And what are they going to deliberate on?" inquired the officer.

"The murder of Sir Richard Stamford," said Julia, answering the question, which was addressed to herself.

"Ah! a pleasant subject for discussion, no doubt," observed Grumley, as he coolly and quietly knocked the ashes out of his pipe and began to refill it: "but we'll see if we can't put a stopper upon them. What are you to go back for, Mrs. Page, at twelve o'clock?"

"Mr. Martin saw Sir Richard come to our house this afternoon; and I am actually employed as a spy to find out whether he lives there, and if he does not, what kind of people do. Because, as Briggs hinted,

if they could bribe those people to let them quietly into the house, they would make easy work of the matter. Now you understand all about it," added Julia, "and can tell me how to proceed."

Mr. Grumley smoked his pipe for several minutes in profound silence, looking up all the time in a thoughtful manner at the ceiling—just as if its blackness could possibly throw a light on the subject of his ruminations.

"There's two ways of going to work in this here business," said the officer at length. "One is for me and my people to make a regular assault on the premises in Thacker's Court, and take the whole gang prisoners: or else to separate them first by a strayty-jim——"

"A what?" demanded Page.

"A stratagem, my good friend—don't interrupt the constable," observed Sir Richard Stamford.

"And I prefer the last method," continued Mr Grumley; "because it will make the thing more surer. Now, ma'am," he said, turning towards Mrs. Page, "I'll tell 'ee what must be done. You'll go back a little while before twelve, and you'll pitch the rascals such a tale that some of 'em will set out to way-lay the baronet this very night. You must manage to accompany the party that's chosen to do the business; and some of my men will be on the look out at one end of the street from which Thacker's Court opens. They'll take care of the party that goes with you. Me and the rest of my people will be hidden close by the court—and when we've seen you and your companions go off, we shall know how to lay our hands on t'others that's left in the house. Now, do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," answered Julia. "I think you have decided on the best plan."

"Most assuredly," exclaimed Sir Richard. "I shall accompany you, Mr. Grumley."

"And so shall I," Mr. Page hastened to observe. "I've got my pistols about me on purpose."

"It's now ten o'clock, ma'am," said the officer, pulling out from his fob a huge silver watch which certainly was not smaller than a moderate-sized turnip and could not have weighed less than a couple of pounds avoirdupois.

"I will depart at once," observed Julia;—and Mr. Grumley politely escorted her to the front door of the Police Office.

"Now, then, Mobbs!" vociferated the officer at the top of his stentorian voice, as he returned along the passage into the room where he had left Page and the baronet; and, in obedience to this summons, a man of most repulsive exterior made his appearance from another part of the establishment.

"Well—what is it?" growled Mobbs, as he entered the room.

Mr. Grumley gave him a few hasty instructions relative to the taking a posse of constables down into the neighbourhood of Thacker's Court, and the manner in which he was to dispose of them in two parties; and the fellow, who seemed to relish the business, grinned knowingly and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"That's the best man I've got under me," observed Mr. Grumley, as soon as Mobbs had disappeared

"Well—one certainly must not judge by outward looks, in that case," said Mr. Page.

"One must be a fool who does," answered the officer, laconically. "That's as desperate a chap a you'd wish to meet in a summer day's walk. He'd think no more of cutting your throat from ear to ear than eatin' his dinner."

"Then I'd much rather not meet him at all in my summer rambles," observed Page, with a cold shudder.

"Ah! but I'm obleeged to employ such fellers," continued Grumley. "You heerd talk, may be, of the man which throwed his wife out of a three pair back and cut his child's head clean off, some five or six years ago, over the water yonder?" demanded the constable, waving his pipe in the direction of Lambeth.

"To be sure I did," exclaimed Page. "But what has that to do with your friend Mobbs?"

"Why, bless ye—he's the wery man," answered Grumley. "Your health, Sir Richard—my respects to you, Mr. Page;"—and he buried his countenance in the pewter-pot.

"You don't mean to say that you've got such a miscreant in your service, Mr. Grumley?" cried the ex-traveller, literally bounding on his seat.

"I tell ye you've just seen him," responded the officer, having finished his draught of porter. "There was two flaws in the indictment. One of 'em described the woman as being named Maria, whereas it was Mary; and t'other represented the murder to have been committed in the parish of Lambeth, whereas 'twas showed that half of the house stood in Lambeth and half in Southwark, and that it was in the Southwark half where the business took place. So the indictment was quashed—and our friend Mobbs got off. Then I took him into my service, where he's been ever since."

"But this must be a most extraordinary state of the law which allows such a wretch to escape with impunity on such miserable technicalities," observed Sir Richard Stamford.

"Lord bless ye," exclaimed Grumley: "that's nothink at-all. There's a many chaps gets off twice as easy. Last Sessions I had a feller at the Old Bailey for prigging from his master, who was a 'bakkinist. The indictment charged him with feloniously stealing twenty pounds of cigars; and everything was as clear against him as possible. But when Counsellor Sharply got up for the defence, he demanded that the cigars should be brought into court. So they was—and they were found to be them kind that has straws in 'em. So the Counsellor orders all the straws to be taken out and has the cigars weighed; and then they prove to be less than eighteen pounds in weight. So he makes a fine speech for three hours and a half, arguing that the prisoner is accused of stealing twenty pounds' weight of cigars, and not twenty pounds' weight of cigars and straws. So the feller gets off."

"And this is really true?" exclaimed Page.

"As true as I'm sitting here," answered Grumley. "When I was a youngster, I was a sheriff's-officers' man—what's called a bum-bailiff. One day my master received a writ of *ca. sa.* to take the body of a genelman who'd died very much in debt, and whose executors wouldn't pay a mag of his liabilities Well, my master and me went and stopped the funeral just as it was entering Pancras Church. Out jumps the chief executor from the black coach; and he says, says he, '*You're welcome to the body: but if you dare lay hand on coffin or shroud, or anything that the corpse is wrapped up in, we'll have our action against you.*'—So my master determined on

taking the body away naked in a hackney-coach: but up comes the solicitor for the executors and says, says he, '*Your powers as a sheriff's-officer don't allow you to make a forcible entry. The lid of this coffin is the front door of the dead body's present residence; and you will break it open at your peril.*'—So my master saw the force of this reasoning and gave up the matter. There's technicalities for you."

"Very remarkable," exclaimed Page.

"Not so very wonderful neither," resumed Mr. Grumley, "when compared with other things that I can tell you. There was my old friend Duggins, the horse-dealer. He was a twenty thousand pound man—and he made a will which said, '*I leave all my black and white horses to my eldest son Joshua Duggins; and the residue of my live stock I leave to my youngest son Samuel.*'—Now it seemed that some of the horses was black—others was white—and others was piebald, or black and white. Well, Joshua claims 'em all; and Samuel insists on having the piebalds. A law-suit takes place: and Joshua's counsel argues in this manner:—'*The black and white horses are clearly bequeathed to my client. He is entitled to the* black: *that is not denied. He is entitled to the* white: *that is also undisputed. Well, then, the will gives him the* black and white; *and therefore he must have the piebald.*'—The Court couldn't resist this reasonin'; and Joshua gets a judgment accordingly."

"This counsel deserved the verdict as a reward for his logic," observed Page, highly delighted with these anecdotes.

"I'll tell you a case that come off last Sessions at the Old Bailey," said Mr. Grumley. "One Bill Starks, a noted thief, was charged in the indictment for feloniously taking a diamond ear-ring from a lady's person. It seems he was togged as a swell-cove and sate next to her at the theatre, where the offence was committed in a moment when all the audience was greatly excited. But Counsellor Sharply pleaded in his defence that there was no robbery *from the person*: because when the prisoner unhooked the diamond drop from the lady's ear, it fell into her lap—and she, instantly perceiving what was done, gave him into custody. So the fact was that there was no *taking from the person* at all; and he was acquitted."

"Your stories get better and better, Mr. Grumley," said Page. "It's only half-past ten," he added, referring to his watch. "Have you got any more to tell us?"

"Lots," replied the constable. "But we must be jogging now.—and I'll give you a few more anecdotes another time. Come, genelmen."

Thus speaking, Mr. Peter Grumley rose from his seat; and, opening a cupboard, he took thence a rough and heavy upper-coat, into which he worked himself by innumerable contortions of his portly frame. In each of the two pockets he thrust a huge horse-pistol: he fastened a cutlass to his waist, so that it was concealed by the great thick coat when buttoned across his ample chest;—and grasping a stout club, he intimated by a familiar nod and a smile that his preparations were complete.

"Now we'll take a hackney-coach and be off," he observed. "My men, under Mobbs's orders, are already half-way there."

Mr. Grumley, Sir Richard Stamford, and Mr. Page sallied forth accordingly.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE RESULT.

SHORTLY before midnight the Magsman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, the Beggarman, Mr. Martin, and Mr. Ramsey were assembled in conclave at the house in Thacker's Court.

It was very evident, by the manner of the parties, that a reconciliation had taken place between Ramsey and the landlord of the Beggar's Staff: in fact, it was indispensable to the interests of the former to forgive, though he might not forget, the murderous attempt made upon him on the river;—and it was owing to the intervention of the Magsman that the affair had been thus patched up.

"Well," said the formidable Joseph Warren, who might be looked on as the president of this council of iniquity, "we can resolve upon nothing until Julia Lightfoot returns. It was fortunate that she happened to be here at the time, Briggs—or you would have had no one to send on this business, and the night would have been lost."

"Here she is!" exclaimed the man to whom the latter remark was addressed: for at the moment a low knock at the front door was heard.

In less than a minute Julia found herself in the presence of the miscreants thus assembled in solemn conclave; and she was welcomed by the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, and the Gallows' Widow as an old acquaintance. Believing, too, that she was sincere in her wish to join them, they congratulated her upon the resolution which she had formed to that effect.

"And now what news, young woman?" demanded Ramsey, as she took her seat at the table.

"Sir Richard Stamford lives at the house to which I was sent," she replied, without the least indication of embarrassment. "He has lodged there since yesterday, and is in and out a great deal. I pretended to be a poor servant out of place, and got into conversation with the landlady. It happens that she requires a maid-of-all-work just at the present time; and I gave her a reference to some fictitious person and feigned address."

"Good," murmured the Gallows' Widow, with that inward kind of low chuckle which was more dreadful to hear than the boisterous mirth of the wildest orgie.

"Sir Richard went out while I was there," continued Julia. "He is a tall, stoutish man, of commanding appearance, and very handsome—wears hessian boots and a short cloak."

"Exactly so!" cried Martin. "You have tracked him to his kennel—and he shall not escape us."

"As he was going out," resumed Mrs. Page, "he asked the landlady for a latch-key, saying that he should not be home again until between two and three in the morning, as he had a consultation with some Bow Street runners to attend——"

"Ah! I told you that the warfare had begun!" exclaimed Ramsey. "He has been collecting his proofs—and now he has fairly opened the campaign. What next, young woman?"

"The landlady gave him the latch-key," proceeded Julia; "but as he took it from her hand, it fell upon the pavement and rolled towards the gutter. We were all three standing close by the threshold of the door when this happened. I officiously stooped down

to look for the key—and indeed I found it immediately. But I pretended not to be able to find it, and secreted it in my dress while still groping about in the mud. At length the search was abandoned—and, the landlady having promised to sit up till two for the baronet, he thanked her and took his departure. He seems a generous man—for he gave me half-a-crown for my trouble in searching after the key."

"This is better than we could have expected!" exclaimed the Magsman. "You have managed admirably, Julia. Where is the key?"

"Here," she answered, handing him the object of his inquiry.

The reader scarcely requires to be informed that Julia acted in this manner with regard to the latch-key in order to support the statement which she had been making; and in that aim she fully succeeded.

"Now, how many people live in the house where you have been?" demanded the Magsman.

"The landlady is there alone at present," was the reply. "She is without a servant—and she was complaining bitterly to me about the badness of the times, observing that Sir Richard Stamford was the only lodger she had, and that she had two floors to let."

"Our course is as easy and plain as it well can be," observed the Magsman. "Briggs, the Beggarman, me, and Julia will go over there without delay. We shall want Julia to show us the right house, so that there may be no infernal mistake. The latch-key will admit us—and we shall bind and gag the landlady. When Sir Richard knocks at the door, Julia will open it. He will readily believe that she is the new servant, after seeing her there this evening. The rest will be managed quietly enough."

"Then I shall stay here till you return, Joe," said the Gallows' Widow.

"Certainly: and so will our two friends here," added the man, glancing towards Martin and Ramsey. "There's plenty of lush in the cupboard—isn't there, Briggs?"

"Plenty," was the answer.

"And you can therefore make yourselves comfortable," said the Magsman, addressing himself to his mistress and the two partners. "Come—we'll be off. There's not much time to lose."

Thus speaking, the villain rose from his seat; and drawing a pistol from each pocket in his coat, he assured himself that the weapons were primed and ready for use. This example was followed by the Big Beggarman, who was equally well armed; while Briggs put on his own upper-garment and likewise secured a brace of pistols about his person.

Julia could not avoid shuddering as she beheld those menacing instruments: for the thought flashed to her mind, that should her treachery be suspected at the moment when the attack was made on the party, a bullet from one of the weapons might be the only recompense she was likely to obtain from the adventure. But she had gone too far to retract; and, instantly summoning all her courage, which was by no means trivial, to her aid, she prepared to accompany the three villains.

But the lynx eyes of the Gallows' Widow had noticed that cold tremor which had passed over her, evanescent as it was;—and advancing straight up to her, she fixed a piercing look upon her countenance, saying, "You are afraid, Julia?"

"Not a whit," was the calm and firm response, while the gaze was met as steadily and unflinchingly.

"What's the matter, Lizzy?" demanded the Magsman.

"Julia trembled—that's all," replied the woman, in a tone indicative of suspicion.

"I don't think I did," said Mrs. Page, with a voice and manner that bespoke confidence: "but if I did, it was because I might not at the moment feel exactly comfortable respecting the work which those pistols are perhaps destined to perform before morning."

"I'm sorry if I wronged you, Julia," said the Gallows' Widow, her suspicions now subsiding. "But as no one amongst us ever trembles through fear, I thought it must be through some other cause."

"If you suspect me of any evil intent, you'd better go and personate the servant yourself," exclaimed Julia, with well-affected indignation. "It's too bad when I've done all I could, and have been praised for what I have done, to be insulted in this manner."

"Come, come—be friends, you women," growled the Magsman, impatiently. "You're too suspicious, Lizzy—and you're too timid, Julia."

"Remember that affair of Page, the commercial traveller," said the Gallows' Widow; "and then tell me that I am too suspicious. However, I don't want to be unjust towards Julia—and I therefore now declare to her that I am satisfied."

"Oh! I am not vindictive," exclaimed Julia. "You are right to be on your guard. But time will show whether I am to be trusted or not. Here's my hand, Mrs. Warren."

"And here's mine, Julia," responded the Gallows' Widow.

She held Mrs. Page's hand in her own for nearly a minute; and finding that it trembled not, her suspicions were completely lulled.

This little scene, which for a moment appeared to menace Julia with a terrible danger, having taken place, glasses of raw spirit were handed round; and the Beggarman, Briggs, the Magsman, and Mrs. Page issued forth together.

The night was very dark; and the rain was now falling heavily. So silent were the court and the street into which it led, that Julia felt assured the sounds of the men's heavy footsteps would give the constables ample warning of their approach, wherever those functionaries might be concealed.

Briggs and the Beggarman went a little way in advance: the Magsman and Julia walked side by side a few paces in their rear. Not a word was spoken;—and they proceeded at a rapid rate.

But just at the moment when the little party were turning the corner at the end of the street, Briggs and the Beggarman were suddenly seized upon by four constables, who overpowered them in an instant.

"Treachery, by God!" vociferated the Magsman; and, as the words fell from his lips, he aimed a tremendous blow at Julia with the butt-end of one of his pistols.

But she glided away the instant that the souffle in front met her ears;—and the next moment the Magsman was pinioned from behind, by the strong grasp of Mobbs himself, while another official passed a noose over his neck, which, falling round his body outside his arms, fastened them to his sides and rendered him thus far powerless.

"Damnation!" roared the Magsman, flinging himself on the ground, and bestowing three or four kicks of savage ferocity on the constables by whom he was environed.

But they speedily mastered him; and he was borne to a hackney-coach, which was waiting in an adjacent street, and in which the Big Beggarman and Briggs were already securely deposited.

Mobbs and two other constables entered the vehicle; and the prisoners received a very plain and unceremonious intimation from the official first named, that the slightest attempt at resistance or escape would be followed by the blowing out of the offender's brains.

The Magsman, Briggs, and the Beggarman vented their rage in sullen oaths; and the coach drove rapidly away towards Clerkenwell Prison.

We must now return to the Gallows' Widow, Ramsey, and Martin, whom we left at the house in Thacker's Court.

Scarcely had the front-door closed behind the expeditionary party, when a feeling of uneasiness began to creep over the Magsman's mistress. A sort of presentiment appeared to tell her that her friends were betrayed. Julia's conduct recurred to her mind, accompanied with suspicions which every instant grew stronger; and yet she endeavoured to wrestle against them, and persuade herself that these fears were only imaginary.

"You appear uneasy," said Ramsey and Martin, both giving utterance to the same observation at the same moment; and they surveyed her with all the acute-suspense inseparable from a consciousness of guilt.

"I don't like this business at all," answered the Gallows' Widow. "I wish we had never undertaken it. Why couldn't you have managed your own affairs without coming to us?" she demanded in a savage tone, a sinister light flashing in her eyes.

"Now don't be angry, my dear young woman," said Ramsey, who, as well as his partner, had caught the infection of her augmenting terrors. "But tell us what you fear?—what is there to apprehend?" he demanded hurriedly.

"Julia Lightfoot's manner haunts me," answered the Gallows' Widow, with a vehemence quite unusual on her part. "But I will just follow them a little distance—I dare say that my fears are groundless——nevertheless——"

"We will go with you," said Ramsey, trembling at the idea of being thus left in a house which treachery might invade with constables at any moment.

"And I also," exclaimed Martin. "Have you any weapons?"

"None," responded the Gallows' Widow. "But you can do no good, and will only draw attention to me if there's any foul play going on in the street. Stay here—I command you," she exclaimed, with as much imperiousness as if she were a queen dictating to the servile courtiers who are ever ready to kiss the toe of Royalty.

"Well—we will stay, then," said Martin, in order to propitiate the woman of whom he began to be afraid.

"If there's any treachery intended, it will be executed close by," observed the Gallows' Widow, now resuming her naturally mild and subdued tone: "for the Bow Street runners would as soon do their work in this neighbourhood as by enticing our friends over into the Borough. I shall not therefore go far—and I hope to return in a few minutes."

With these words, she quitted the house.

Along the court hastened the Gallows' Widow: she emerged into the street—strained her eyes to penetrate the darkness as she looked up and down—and, perceiving nothing to alarm her, hurried on in the same direction which her friends had taken five minutes previously.

All was quiet: for, in truth, the short but energetic struggle between the three miscreants and the constables was already over, and they were by this time safe in the hackney-coach, as ere now stated.

Suddenly the sounds of light footsteps approaching, fell on the ears of the Gallows' Widow. She stood up in the dark shade of a door-way—and a female passed hurriedly by. It was Julia, who, having watched from a little distance the success of the constables and the discomfiture of the three villains, was retracing her way up the street to endeavour to find where Grumley's corps, with her husband and Sir Richard Stamford, was concealed.

The keen eyes of the Gallows' Widow instantly recognised the young woman, who in a moment felt a hand clutch her by the shoulder.

"Where are you going?" demanded the former in a resolute voice.

So completely unexpected was the appearance of the Gallows' Widow, and so abrupt was this question, that Julia was now really confused and embarrassed; and her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth.

"What has happened?—why are you alone?—speak!" exclaimed the woman, whose desperate character, in spite of her reserved manners and habitually subdued tone, was no secret to Mrs. Page.

"You have no right to question me," responded the latter; and, bursting away, she flew along the street—the Gallows' Widow pursuing her with an equal agility.

The entrance of the court was gained: but Julia was passing it rapidly by, when the Gallows' Widow succeeded in overtaking her.

"Now you shall answer me—or I will dash your brains out against the wall!" cried the infuriate woman, flinging herself upon Julia with the rage and force of a tigress.

The violence of the assault, which Mrs. Page turned round to resist, brought them both to the ground; but at the same moment the trampling of many feet were heard—and in another instant Grumley's detachment, headed by this official himself, appeared upon the spot.

"What the devil's all this?" ejaculated Mr. Page, recognising his wife by her voice—for it was too dark to catch a glimpse of her features—and Julia was crying for help.

"Wretch!" shrieked the Gallows' Widow, dashing the young woman's head upon the pavement; then, suddenly starting up, she bounded away, leaving her shawl in the hands of Grumley who had fixed his iron grasp upon her.

Two of the constables rushed off in full pursuit, while Mr. Page raised his wife, who, though for a few moments partially stunned by the blow which she had received, soon recovered her senses.

"The Magsman, Briggs, and the Beggarman are captured," she hastened to observe: "and Ramsey and Martin are alone in the house. At least I should think that they must be there still," she added.

"At all events we will lose no time in entering the place," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford.

"Come along," said Mr. Grumley — and the party turned into the court.

Mr. Grumley did not adopt the useless ceremony of knocking at the door: but, throwing his herculean form with all his force against it, he burst it open in a moment. He then rushed into the back room, guided by the light which peered from beneath the door of the chamber; and Ramsey and Martin suddenly found themselves in the power of a posse of constables.

"We are lost!" exclaimed the elder banker, clasping his hands, and sinking back on the chair from which he had sprung when the first evidence of the assault upon the house had met his ears.

"Ah! our enemy!" ejaculated Ramsey, catching sight of the tall form of Sir Richard Stamford in the door-way.

"Now, mind, genelmen," cried Grumley, "anythink you say here will be used against you elsewhere, according to the stattit in that case made and purwided. The game's all up, I can tell you: your accomplices is in the hands of my man Mobbs —and you'll all sleep to-night in Clerkenwell."

"We will attempt no resistance," said Ramsey: "but pray remove us with as little noise as possible. There's no use in arousing the whole neighbourhood."

"Come along quiet, then," returned Grumley. "As for me, I'm a perfect lamb of an officer when genelmen behave as such: but if they tip me any of their nonsense, I precious soon become as queer a customer to deal with as a lion rampant."

What Mr. Grumley's ideas of a lion rampant might be, we cannot pretend to guess. The warning was not however lost upon the two bankers, who submitted without the slightest attempt at resistance to the disagreeable process of handcuffing which now took place.

"May I be allowed to say a word to Sir Richard Stamford in private?" asked Mr. Martin, in an imploring tone.

"Not very well," responded Grumley.

"Nor should I consent to the proposition, were it admissible," said the baronet, with a voice and manner which too plainly indicated that his partners had no mercy to expect at his hands.

"You are here to triumph over us at last, Sir Richard," observed Ramsey, in a tone of hateful malignity.

"No, sir—I am here to aid the officers of justice in securing two offenders against the sacred rights of private friendship and the public laws of society," was the calm and deliberate answer.

At this moment the two constables who had set off in pursuit of the Gallows' Widow, made their appearance with the intimation that she had succeeded in effecting her escape.

"Well, it can't be helped," observed Grumley, taking the announcement with the phlegmatic coolness peculiar alike to the man and to his office. "We've got five Gallows' Birds—and so we may manage to do without the Gallows' Widow," he, added, chuckling at his own joke.

The subordinate constables laughed also, as in duty bound towards their superior; and the whole party then moved away from the house.

But Mr. Ramsey's fears relative to the arousing of the neighbourhood were fully justified by the appearance of the court when they all emerged into it. The inhabitants of the dwellings, alarmed by the bursting open of the door, had crowded to the threshold—many of them holding candles in their hands in order to ascertain what was going on;—and when the prisoners, the constables, Sir Richard Stamford, Page, and Julia, issued from the house, a general buzz and murmur of voices indicated the curiosity which was experienced on all sides.

Ramsey and Martin held down their heads as they passed rapidly along the court, now completely illuminated by the candles at the doors and the light streaming from the open windows:—and bitterly—bitterly, in the depths of their souls, did they repent the hour when they first stepped aside from the path of rectitude and honour.

"There's been a precious smash up there in Briggs's house," observed one of the spectators to another.

"Ah! and many will be implicated, I'll be bound," was the response.

"Officer," exclaimed the first speaker, "what's the number of chaps taken?"

"Five on 'em," answered Grumley, who was somewhat proud of the night's achievement.

"And they're sure to be all scragged!" cried the querist, in a tone expressive of joy. "I say, Bill," he added, turning towards his neighbour, "wont it be a precious lark to see five on 'em tucked up at one time. We ain't had such a treat for the last six months. Ah! George the Third's the King for hanging up his subjects in half-dozens and dozens! A nice Father of his People he is—ain't he, Bill?"

The answer that was given to this remark, did not reach the ears of the two prisoners: for at that moment the party turned from the court into the street. But Ramsey and Martin shuddered from head to foot as those awfully prophetic words, relative to the hanging, flippant though the manner of their utterance might have been, struck like a knell upon their startled ears.

Two hackney-coaches had been provided by the officers for this night's work: one had already departed with its freight for Clerkenwell Prison—and the second now received the two bankers, together with Grumley and a couple of runners.

Sir Richard Stamford, Page, and Julia departed in one direction, while the vehicle took another; and in due course Mr. Martin and Mr. Ramsey were lodged in the gaol whither the Magsman, Briggs, and the Big Beggarman had preceded them.

For in the times of which we are writing, the system of retaining prisoners in the custody of the constables until after the examination before a magistrate, was not an invariable practice, and individuals charged with serious offences were usually conveyed at once to a prison.

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CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE MANŒUVRING MILLINER.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning following the night of adventures just related; and Mrs. Brace awoke from a pleasant dream in her downy bed. Hastily referring to her watch, which lay upon a little table close at hand, she discovered that she had somewhat over-slept herself; and, rising from her couch, she thrust her feet into a pair of slippers, put on a dressing-gown, and drew back the window curtains. The pavement of Pall Mall looked white and frosty—for the weather was intensely cold: but reckless of the freezing air, the handsome milliner proceeded to comb out her long black tresses—and when she had performed this portion of her toilette, she entered an adjoining room, in which there was a large bath filled with water.

Laying aside her vesture, Mrs. Brace unhesitatingly plunged into the bath—the thin ice which covered the surface of the water, breaking with a sharp crackling sound into a myriad pieces as the robust form of the lady thus broke through it.

For a few instants her teeth chattered; for the water was cold—piercingly, bitterly cold: but this sensation speedily passed away—and as she rubbed herself all over with her hands, a glow of warmth was suffused throughout her entire frame. In three or four minutes she emerged from the bath; and then the rapid friction of large coarse towels augmented that genial heat—and while her cheeks became animated with the ruddy tinge of health, her neck, shoulders, bosom, and limbs appeared polished, white, and dazzling as alabaster.

Resuming the slight attire which she had put off, Mrs. Brace returned to her bed-room—arranged her hair in negligent curls, which showered down her back—performed her ablutions with scented soap—and used a costly pearl-powder for her teeth. Having thus beautified herself, she put on a becoming cap, and retired again to her couch.

Almost immediately afterwards Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room, and appeared surprised to find that her mistress was not up and dressed.

"I am somewhat indisposed this morning," said Mrs. Brace; "and shall take my breakfast in bed. By the bye, Lord Florimel will call a little before nine o'clock: but he may come to me here—as I know that he wishes to see me on some important business."

"Very good, ma'am," returned the abigail; and she quitted the room.

In a few minutes Harriet reappeared, carrying a massive silver tray, on which the milliner's morning repast was spread. The chocolate was steaming in a silver pot—the boiled milk was contained in a cream-jug of the same metal—and a round of toast, made with great care, was kept warm by the plate being placed over a basin of hot water. In fact, had Mrs. Brace been a Duchess, it was impossible to serve her with a more delicate attention.

Harriet retired—and the milliner was half-reclining on the large downy pillows, sipping her chocolate, when Lord Florimel made his appearance.

Throwing aside his cloak and hat, the young nobleman approached the bed, saying, "My dear friend, I am quite chagrined to hear of your indisposition. What is the matter with you?—and when were you taken ill?"

"I awoke with a dreadful head-ache—but it will pass away presently," answered Mrs. Brace, assuming the languid tone and looks of an invalid. "You must excuse me, my dear Florimel, for receiving you in my bed-chamber——"

"It is not the first time I have set my feet in this sanctuary," interrupted the nobleman, with a sly smile.

"True," observed Mrs. Brace: "it was here that you dressed yourself in lady's attire, preparatory to the little adventure with Miss Pauline Clarendon."

"You mistake, my dear friend," said Florimel. "I did not dress myself—it was you that performed the duties of abigail on my behalf."

"And I remember you were so naughty all the time that I had the greatest difficulty in lacing your stays and hooking your gown," returned the milliner.

"I must admit that I snatched a kiss or two while you were thus engaged, my dear friend," observed Florimel: "but I was a very wicked fellow then. Now, as you are well aware, I am thoroughly altered—and indeed, I may be safely trusted in any lady's bed-chamber in the universe."

"Still in the same sentimental mood, my lord?" exclaimed the milliner, smiling archly in spite of her affected indisposition. "A few weeks have made a marvellous alteration in you."

"But Pauline is so beautiful—so truly beautiful!" cried the young nobleman, with an unfeigned enthusiasm; "and she is so amiable—so good—so gentle—so virtuous——"

"I have not a doubt of it," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "But shall you always remain faithful to her? Think you that, when you are married to her, you will never go astray?"

"I am too much a man of the world to believe in the existence of such constancy on the part of one of my own sex," responded Florimel, gravely: "but this I do declare and believe—that years will elapse before temptation can become sufficiently strong to render me faithless to Pauline. At all events, I shall strive to merit her good opinion—I shall endeavour by my conduct to deserve her;—and you may depend upon it, my dear friend, that if I had not known you for a considerable time, I should not have ventured up into your bed-chamber on this occasion."

"Then you consider me to be no one?" said Mrs. Brace, pouting her lips in so ravishing a manner that Lord Florimel could not help thinking to himself how remarkably handsome the milliner was looking.

"You misunderstand me altogether," he exclaimed. "I consider you to be a very dangerous creature," he added, smiling, "on account of your beautiful person and your fascinating manners."

"Well—I am glad to see that your lordship can pay a compliment, in spite of the sentimentalism which has taken so firm a hold upon you;"—and Mrs. Brace smiled also—but it was to display her brilliant teeth to the best advantage.

"Oh! I am not unmindful of the claims of other ladies upon my admiration," said Florimel; "but then, I have acquired strength sufficient to enable me to resist all temptations. As I was observing, however, I look upon you so much in the light of a sincere friend, that I do not hesitate to venture into your bed-chamber. Were it otherwise, I should not have come hither—even if you were only a quarter as handsome as you really are. And permit me to

observe that, considering your indisposition, you *look* uncommonly well: your cheeks are animated with a healthy glow—and your eyes sparkle brilliantly."

"I am slightly feverish, perhaps," said Mrs. Brace.

"On the contrary, you are quite cool," returned Florimel, after a pause, during which he had taken her hand. "But tell me, my dear friend, he continued,—"what is the nature of this important business concerning which you desired to see me?"

"I will explain it," said Mrs. Brace, throwing herself back upon the pillows, and stretching her white hands beneath her head in such a manner that the movement necessarily made the sleeves fall back, as they were unfastened at the wrists,—thus displaying to the eyes of the young nobleman the superbly moulded arms. "Yesterday evening," she resumed, as if quite unconscious of the act just recorded, "a young lady, dressed in deep mourning, called upon me. It appears that she has very recently lost both her parents—under what circumstances she did not inform me; and she was so completely overwhelmed with grief when speaking of them, that I dared not ask her. Since that period, however, she has been meditating seriously upon the course of life which she ought to adopt in order to earn a livelihood. The poor creature possesses a few hundred pounds: but she does not wish to exist in idleness upon a sum of money which must sooner or later be exhausted. Being skilful with her needle, she thought of turning that talent to advantage; and, having procured a list of the principal millinery establishments in London, she resolved to apply to them for work. As accident ordained, mine was the very first house whereat she called; and I made immediate arrangements with her. This evening she takes up her abode beneath my roof."

"Ah! my dear Mrs. Brace, I begin to understand—nay, more—I *do* comprehend the object for which you have sent for me," exclaimed Florimel, in a reproachful tone: "but I dare not—no—I dare not—— I am proof against temptation."

"At all events, my good friend, I lost no time in making you acquainted with the circumstance," said Mrs. Brace. "The moment the young lady took her departure, I despatched a note to your lordship's mansion."

"Our past connexion, and the nature of it, render me grateful to you for this preference," observed the nobleman: "but again I say, I dare not! No—I have at length obtained a formal introduction to my Pauline—I have passed in her society, at the house of a mutual friend, one of the most delicious evenings of my life—I saw her adorning the ball-room, radiant in her youthful beauty and matchless in elegance and grace—and I could not prove unfaithful to her. Believe me, my dear friend, I really love and adore Pauline Clarendon—and I should hate myself, were I to forget the vows which I have pledged to her, and the oaths which I have secretly taken within the depths of my own heart."

"It is not for me to tempt you to break those vows," said Mrs. Brace; and by another movement, skilfully executed and having all the air of negligence, she afforded a glimpse of her bosom. "At the same time," she continued, "I must inform you, my dear friend, that never have you seen a more charming creature than the young lady who is to take up her abode beneath my roof to-night. She is not more than sixteen—the very age which you most admire; and her form is a perfect model of symmetry and grace. Her eyes are a fine dark blue, melting and tender;—her hair is a deep brown, lustrous with a rich gloss;—and no lily can compare with the whiteness of her skin. You know that I am a good judge of beauty in my own sex, Florimel—and I can assure you that this angelic girl of whom I am speaking, is far superior to any whom you have ever beheld in this house."

"Do not say any more upon the subject," exclaimed Florimel, whose passions were inflamed not only by the picture which Mrs. Brace had drawn of the fair unknown, but likewise by the contemplation of her own charms; for he found it impossible to withdraw his gaze from that breast of snow.

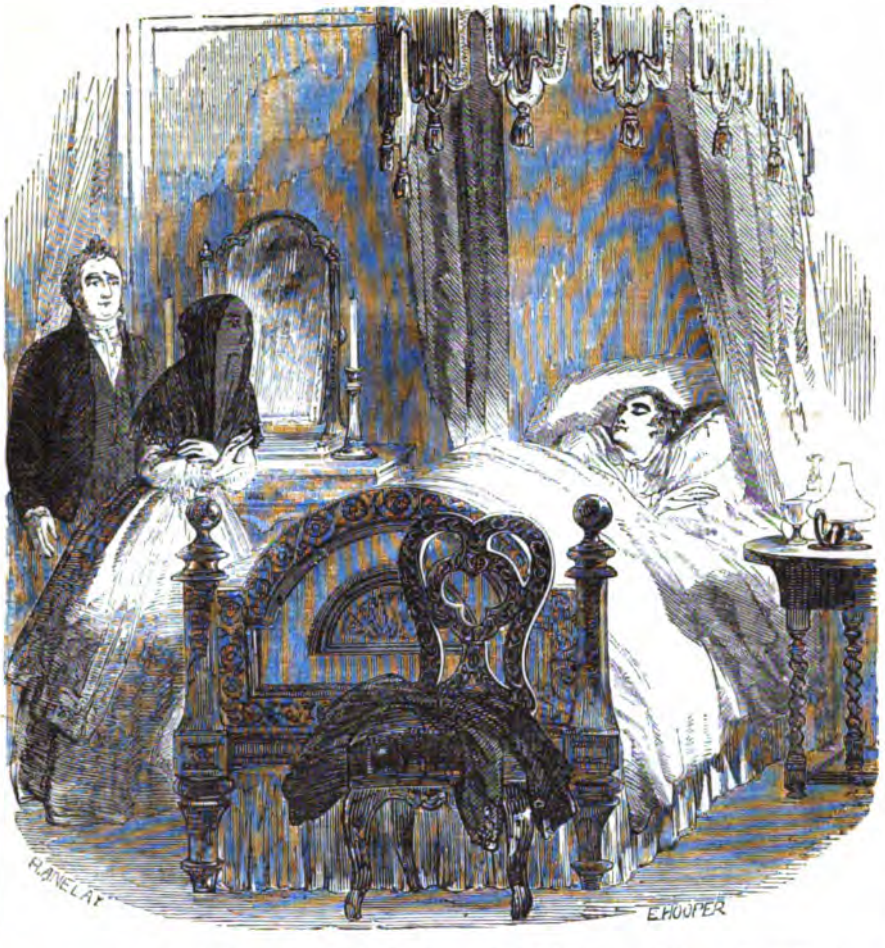
"Now listen to me, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, turning her countenance upon him, and assuming her most witching looks: "you love Pauline—you have sworn to be faithful to her. But was not the vow somewhat rashly made?—and will it not be difficult to keep? Months must elapse before you can marry her: for the sake of decency in reference to the usages of the world, you cannot propose to her—or rather admit that you have proposed to her—under six or eight weeks. Then her father will have to be consulted. Of course he will consent to the match; but it would be unseemly to a degree and indelicately precipitate to fix a very early day for the bridal. As I have observed, therefore, some months will intervene ere you lead your beloved Pauline to the altar; and, during that period, must you remain an anchorite? I cannot believe that you will;—and I do not consider that Pauline herself has a right to make such an exaction. When once you are her husband, she may then have a right to demand an account of your proceedings: but in the interval you are still your own master, free and independent."

"I comprehend all the speciousness of your reasoning—and yet I can scarcely resist it," murmured Florimel, in a subdued tone. "Oh! my dear friend," he exclaimed, suddenly starting from the chair which he had occupied close to the bed; "do not tempt me—I implore you not to undermine the good resolutions that I have formed. My Pauline *has* a right to my constancy—*has* a claim upon my fidelity! The peculiar circumstances under which our acquaintance was formed——"

"Will prevent her from giving you the credit which your constancy and fidelity would assuredly deserve," added Mrs. Brace.

"I dare not remain to hear you argue thus, my dear friend," cried Florimel: then, seizing her hand, and pressing it warmly, he said, "I cannot find it in my heart to reproach you—although you really deserve vituperation from my lips. But I have a sincere friendship for you—I would do anything I could to serve you—and you know it. Show me, therefore, some gratitude in return—and tempt me not."

"My dear Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, pressing his hand with violence, as if it were an involuntary act—or rather one prompted by the fervour of grateful feelings,—"I am aware of your kind and generous sentiments in my behalf—and I thank you sincerely—Oh! most sincerely! For I have always been fond of you from the first moment that



we met—and—and—to tell you the truth, Florimel——But, no—it would be ridiculous on my part——"

And Mrs. Brace burst into tears.

"My dear creature," exclaimed the young nobleman, throwing his arm round her neck; "what, in the name of heaven, is the matter with you? Have I said or done ought to afflict you? If so, I declare most solemnly that nothing was farther from my intention. Speak—tell me—leave off weeping——"

"Oh! you will despise me,—you will laugh at me, Florimel!" murmured the handsome but crafty milliner, drawing him towards her in such a manner that his cheek rested against her own.

"I am incapable of treating a friend with ridicule," said the nobleman. "But tell me, my dear creature—tell me—what you would have me understand?"

"That I love you," answered Mrs. Brace, in a tone of melting tenderness.

"Alas! this is most unfortunate," said Florimel, his voice expressing commiseration: "for you are well aware that my heart is devoted to Pauline——"

"Think not, my lord," interrupted the milliner, "that I was insane—mad—rabid enough to suppose that you could *love* me in return—*me*, who am so many years older than yourself. But you have toyed with me at times—you have caressed me—you have complimented me. How could I do otherwise than conceive an affection for you—*you* who are so eminently handsome! Oh! there *was* no favour—there *is* none—which you might not have demanded of me with the certainty of its being accorded!"

And, as she thus spoke, Mrs. Brace wound her arms round the nobleman's neck and fastened her lips to his.

Now, in spite of all his excellent resolutions—his vows—and his sincere intention of remaining faithful to Pauline Clarendon, Lord Florimel was

placed in a situation which afforded an opportunity that could scarcely be resisted. And the reader must make all possible allowances for him, if his firmness did rapidly ebb away. For there he was—encircled in the warm and tender embrace of an amorous woman, who was strikingly handsome—a woman who, although in the meridian of her life, nevertheless appeared several years younger, inasmuch as care and attention had wonderfully preserved her charms,—a woman, therefore, who possessed all the attractions of a young girl, combined with the dangerous fascinations of an accomplished syren.

Alas! we must confess that Florimel was on the point of surrendering—was on the very verge of suffering himself to be seduced by that artful and voluptuous creature, as if *he* were the coy young woman and *she* was the experienced man of mature age,—yes, he was about to yield to the opportunity, the place, and the temptation,—when his good genius interposed. Or was it for thy sweet sake, O innocent and beauteous Pauline! that some propitious power manifested its saving influence at that moment when the vows pledged to thee were on the point of being lost in perjury?

We know not: suffice it to say that at the instant when Mrs. Brace was about to triumph and Lord Florimel to succumb, a hasty knock was heard at the door of her chamber.

The young nobleman burst from the arms of the milliner, who instantly threw herself back upon the pillows, drawing her vesture over her palpitating bosom: then, in a voice as composed and collected as she could render it, she exclaimed, "Come in!"

Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room bearing a letter.

"I shall now say farewell," cried Lord Florimel, inwardly rejoicing at this providential interruption: for a sudden revulsion of feeling had revived all his good resolutions in a moment. "I see that you have business to attend to, my dear friend," he added: then, having pressed her hand, he hurried away, regardless of the look which she cast to implore him to remain.

"From whom does this note come?" demanded the disappointed and enraged milliner, scarcely able to subdue an inclination to wreak her spite and annoyance upon the abigail.

"A young woman, dressed in widow's weeds, brought it, ma'am," was the answer. "I should not have intruded until you were disengaged, but that she said the letter was of the utmost importance to you as well as to others."

"Strange!—whom can if be from?" murmured Mrs. Brace. "Is the person waiting?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I'm inclined to think that there's something strange about her—for the moment I opened the street-door, she rushed in and shut the door again of her own accord, just for all the world as if she was afraid of being seen coming here, or as if some one was watching her outside."

"Wait an instant," said Mrs. Brace, a vague misgiving seizing her: for as she turned the soiled and ill-folded letter over in her hand, she could not help associating it in some way or another with her husband, the Magsman.

At length mustering up courage to open it, she saw that the contents were written in a scrawling female hand, as was also the address outside; and, with a sinking of the heart and a changing countenance, she perused the following lines:—

"MADAM,—Fearful that when you hear a stranger wanted to speak to you at this early hour, you might send down a message to say you was engaged, or something of that sort, I take the liberty of sending you this note while I wait for your answer. I want you to see me at once and without delay; because I've something of the greatest importance to tell you about Joe Warren, and something or another that you must do, since he is in trouble and I'm unable to help him as I could wish. So if you want to avoid bother and exposure and all that, you'll be so good as to see me in private at once; and if not, I shall know what to think and how to act. But I mean no offence, only to let you see that I'm firm.

"Your humble servant,

"ELIZABETH MARKS."

Harriet, the lady's-maid, saw that her mistress changed colour and grew considerably agitated as she read the note: for indeed Mrs. Brace was utterly unable to conceal, much less subdue, the painful emotions which its contents excited in her bosom.

"You may conduct the woman hither," she said, in a low and hoarse tone.

The abigail withdrew; and the milliner instantly rose, slipped on her dressing-gown, and seated herself in a chair near the toilette-table to await the coming of this most unwelcome visitress.

The colour had completely fled from her cheeks, which, though retaining all their natural plumpness, were now ghastly in appearance: for the voluptuous thoughts and libidinous ideas which so recently filled her bosom, giving animation to her fine countenance, had been suddenly dispersed, like chaff upon the whirlwind, by the incident that had broken in on her guilty pleasures.

Presently the door opened; and a young woman in widow's weeds was introduced by Harriet, who immediately retired, leaving her mistress alone with the stranger.

"Sit down," said the milliner, in a suffocating tone, as she pointed to a chair; "and now tell me what has occurred—who you are—and what you require of me."

"In the first place, ma'am," said the Gallows' Widow—for she it was,—"Joseph Warren was arrested last night—and he's in prison now. Secondly, I suppose there's no offence in my telling you that I'm his very particular friend——"

"I understand you, young woman. Go on!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

"Thirdly, then, I want you to do a certain something which I can't explain in a moment, and which will help him to get out of gaol as comfortable as possible," added the Gallows' Widow, "or else he'll be hung, to a certainty."

The milliner shuddered—not so much at the idea of the probable fate of the Magsman, but at the thought that she should have the misfortune to be so closely linked to such a wretch.

"Ah! you may well be shocked, ma'am," observed the Gallows' Widow, on whom the tremor which thus convulsed the entire frame of Mrs. Brace was not lost: "it would indeed be an awful thing for you to know that your own husband was hung up like a dog."

"Spare your comments, young woman," said the milliner, in a stifling voice. "I see that you know all—everything?" she added, fixing a searching look upon her.

"Yes: all—everything," responded the Gallows' Widow. "Warren has no secrets from me. I am acquainted with his adventure here—in this

very humble—one Sunday night, when the Prince of Wales was hid behind the curtain——"

"Hush!" murmured Mrs. Brace, putting her fore-finger to her quivering lip: "I do indeed perceive that you know all. But on what charge has this unhappy man been arrested?"

"Rather inquire, madam, upon what charge he has *not* been arrested," said the Gallows' Widow, emphatically. "There is no use in mincing matters with you. He is sure to be hanged if he don't escape—and I can't help him. In fact, I should be made a prisoner myself if I was seen by any of the runners—and it was in a sort of desperation that I came to you now. These clothes," she added, glancing down at her dress, "are quite enough to betray me: but I don't dare go near the place where I live to get a change, and I must wait till dusk before I can venture to a shop where they sell second-hand things."

"I will give you a change presently," said Mrs. Brace. "And now tell me what you wish me to do. But let me warn you beforehand that if you think or hope that the Prince can aid in this matter, you are very much mistaken."

"I am not such a fool as to entertain such an idea, ma'am" answered the Gallows' Widow. "But you can do something—and I'll tell you what it is. Warren is sure to be committed to-day for trial at the Old Bailey. The sessions are now on—and the magistrate won't throw any delays in the way of getting rid of a man who has so long been a terror to the public, and who has hitherto set the constables at defiance. This is the truth—and there's no use in closing one's eyes to it. So to Newgate will Warren be taken before night. But he must not stay there, ma'am, till his trial comes on: he must escape, or nothing can save him."

"And do you wish me to aid in that escape?" asked the milliner, trembling from head to foot.

"I do," was the firm and emphatic reply;—"and I will tell you how. But first let me observe that if you agree, I will find some means to convey to Warren an intimation, in the course of to-day, that he has friends actively working for him—and that there is hope."

"Proceed—and state your plans," said Mrs. Brace.

The young woman unfolded her scheme: but as the details thereof will transpire in due course, it is unnecessary to record them now. Suffice it to observe that after a long conversation the milliner consented to adopt the course proposed by the Gallows' Widow; and the latter, having changed her weeds for a dress which Mrs. Brace procured for her from Harriet, took her departure, well pleased with the result of this interview.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A VISIT TO MRS. LINDLEY'S HOUSE.

WHILE this scene was taking place at the dwelling of the handsome milliner in Pall Mall, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who had risen early that same morning, was repairing on foot towards Fore Street, Lambeth.

The young gentleman felt so much better and stronger that he was now capable of walking some considerable distance; the fresh frosty air did him good:—and there was a roseate hue upon his cheeks, until recently so wan—so thin—so pale!

On reaching Fore Street, he had no difficulty in discovering the midwife's house. Its sombre and sinister aspect—the large wooden shades which projected over the windows—and the heavy curtains drawn inside all the casements, were sufficient indications of that dread establishment, the exterior of which he had not failed to observe on the night when he visited it in company with the Countess of Desborough.

His summons at the front door was speedily answered by Mrs. Lindley, herself;—and the old harridan started back in dismay the moment she recognised Arthur Eaton. But instantly recovering herself—for she was a woman of strong nerve and great presence of mind—she threw all the courtesy of which she was capable into her invitation to enter the parlour; and a few moments saw the young gentleman and the midwife alone together in that gloomy apartment.

Mrs. Lindley placed a chair for the accommodation of her visitor; and seating herself near the fire, she caressed her great cat, which put up its arching back as it rubbed itself against her legs, purring all the time with a sound resembling the wooden works of a Dutch clock when being wound up.

"I wish to speak to Miss Aylmer," said Arthur Eaton, breaking a silence which seemed awful in that chamber of funereal gloom.

"Miss Aylmer left me yesterday, sir," answered the midwife.

"Left you yesterday!" exclaimed the young gentleman, in amazement. "At what o'clock did she thus take her departure."

"At about five in the evening," was the response.

"But her uncle and the Countess are unaware of this circumstance," hastily observed Arthur: "for I was with them between eight and nine last night—and they knew not that Miss Aylmer even contemplated a removal for the next fortnight."

"It is nevertheless as I have told you, sir," replied Mrs. Lindley.

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed Arthur. "Whither is she gone."

"I am as ignorant as yourself on that head," was the rejoinder.

"Woman, you are deceiving me!" cried the young gentleman, in a stern tone.

"You may search throughout my dwelling, if you please," said Mrs. Lindley, with an air and manner of such confidence that Eaton saw she was speaking the truth.

"But this departure must have been sudden—precipitate?" he remarked interrogatively.

"Somewhat so," returned the midwife. "The monotony of this place became intolerable to her—and, finding herself strong enough, she went away."

"And yet it is not three weeks since she was confined," exclaimed Arthur. "There is something mysterious and even wrong in this step which she has taken," he added, rather in a musing tone to himself than addressing the midwife. "That she should not have returned to the abode of her excellent uncle and his generous-hearted Countess, I cannot understand. They learnt from me last night my intention to visit Miss Aylmer this morning—they were made acquainted with the object for which I desired an interview with Fernanda——"

"And that object?" said Mrs. Lindley, in a voice of anxious enquiry.

"Does not regard you, madam," responded Mr. Eaton, somewhat sharply, as if he thought her query to be impertinent. "But I had a twofold mo-

tive in visiting this house to-day. My first and principal object was to see Miss Aylmer: my second was to hold a very serious conversation with *you*."

"With *me!*" ejaculated Mrs. Lindley, unable to subdue or conceal the strong spasm of terror which shook her entire frame; for her guilty soul was appalled with a thousand dreadful apprehensions sweeping through her imagination.

"Yes, madam—with *you*," repeated Arthur, emphatically, and at the same time fixing upon the woman, a look in which abhorrence, pity, and reproach were visibly commingled.

"Hush! do not speak too loud—walls have ears—the people passing in the street may stop to listen," said the midwife, in broken sentences hoarsely whispered—while terror was evidently obtaining a firmer hold upon her.

"I am not accustomed to use intemperate language, nor to speak with excitement," observed Mr. Eaton. "You have nothing to fear from me, either; profound—alas! *too* profound— as my acquaintance with your crimes now is. I am not here as a minister of Justice, but as one who would urge you to repentance. No—for the sake of that young but guilty creature whom I first tutored in the ways of error, I will spare you. You need not, therefore, dread even exposure at my hands; but I warn you, Mrs. Lindley, that this forbearance on my part depends solely upon the candour and truthfulness with which you shall respond to the questions that I am about to put to you."

"What do you mean, good sir?" inquired the woman, her countenance becoming ghastly, and her whole form shivering and shuddering from head to foot. "You spoke of *crimes*—or did my ears deceive me?"

"No—that was the word I used," answered Mr. Eaton, solemnly.

"Crimes!" murmured the midwife, staring upon him with a dull vacancy, as if her senses was appalled.

"Rouse yourself to hear and understand me, woman," proceeded Arthur, in the same serious, impressive and unexcited tone. "When I was here upwards of a fortnight since, I discovered two documents in yonder book-case—and of those documents I took copies. The one was a receipt for a slow poison—the other was its antidote. The poison had for months been circulating in my veins—the antidote is rapidly restoring me to health and life!"

"My God! you will send me to the scaffold!" moaned the wretched woman, falling on her knees at the feet of the Hon. Arthur Eaton.

"No—I will pardon you, on the condition that I have named," said the young gentleman, forcing her to rise, and compelling her to re-seat herself.

"O Lord! what will become of me?" she murmured, covering her haggard face with her long skinny hands, and rocking herself backward and forward in a state of mind more easily conceived than explained.

"I tell you again that you have nothing to fear, beyond the stings of your own guilty conscience, if you answer my questions faithfully and truly," said Eaton.

"Oh! sir, how generous you are!" cried the wretched woman, endeavouring to compose her features and steady the thoughts that were whirling in her brain. "Demand of me what you will—I swear to reply frankly and honestly."

"In the first place you will give me an explanation of the way in which my valet, William Dudley, was suborned to administer slow poison to his master," said the Hon. Mr. Eaton.

"William Dudley is a distant relation of mine," returned Mrs. Lindley, terror compelling her to speak the truth. "When Miss Aylmer first discovered that you did not intend to fulfil your promise and make her your wife, she resolved upon vengeance! This was while she was at her uncle's seat in Derbyshire, and while you were staying at Marchmont Castle, in the same county. Her first impulse was to poison you—and by means of heavy bribes she won over William Dudley to her interests. But Dudley recommended her to consult me; and when she was compelled to confess her situation to the Earl and Countess of Desborough that nobleman inserted an advertisement in a newspaper to the effect that a place of the strictest retirement was sought for a young lady. In consequence of a letter which I received from William Dudley, I answered that advertisement; and thus was it contrived that Miss Aylmer should become an inmate of my establishment. In the eyes of the Earl and Countess this arrangement had no appearance of having been previously concerted; and in due time Miss Aylmer took up her abode beneath this roof."

"Continue your narrative," said Mr. Eaton. "It has all the aspect of truth—and it is well for you that your explanations are thus candidly and frankly given."

"When once Miss Aylmer was here," proceeded the midwife, encouraged by the young gentleman's observations, "you may readily conjecture how easy it was to concoct a scheme of vengeance on her behalf. Allured by the large sums which she lavished upon me—for she appears to have an illimitable command of gold—I consented at an evil hour to aid her in the accomplishment of her vindictive designs. Then did I reveal to her the mystery of that subtle poison for which I possess a receipt; and, in compliance with a letter despatched to Marchmont Castle, William Dudley solicited leave of absence to visit London for a few days."

"I remember it well," observed Mr. Eaton. "Proceed."

"He came hither—received his instructions, together with the poison—and hastened back into Derbyshire," continued the old woman. "Immediately afterwards your mysterious malady commenced."

"Yes—this is true!" murmured Arthur, shuddering from head to foot at the cold-blooded cruelty thus revealed.

"You are therefore satisfied that I am not deceiving you now?" said Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of anxiety.

"Too well satisfied—too well convinced that you are speaking the truth!" was the solemn answer.

"And you will spare me—you will not make use of this confession against me——"

"No—no: I have already pledged myself on that head. And, now woman," continued the Hon. Mr. Eaton, "you will tell me whether this infernal poison is at work elsewhere? Have you other victims——"

"I solemnly and sacredly assure you that there breathes not a human being who, at least to my knowledge, is now suffering from the effects of that poison," responded Mrs. Lindley, emphatically.

"'Tis so far well. And now give me those two receipts," said Arthur.

The midwife rose from her chair: opened the book-case—drew forth the large volume—and took thence the two papers which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had demanded.

"I am afraid that your memory retains but too well the particulars herein recited," he said: "at all events it will be prudent to serve them thus."

And he threw the receipts into the fire, where they were consumed in a moment.

"Would to God I had never seen them—never had them in my possession at all!" exclaimed the midwife. "Oh! sir, how can I sufficiently thank you for your forbearance with regard to me!"

"Be assured that henceforth I shall keep a constant watch upon you, Mrs. Lindley," answered the young man: "and that if you sin again, nothing shall prevent me from handing you over to the grasp of justice. But you have yet another answer to give me: for I must know whence and how you obtained these receipts?"

"From an old man named Lightfoot," responded Mrs. Lindley. "I heard a few days ago that he was dead."

"Now, then, our interview terminates," said Mr. Eaton, rising from his chair. "But before I take my departure, let me again warn you to be circumspect in your future conduct. You have been dealt with by me in a merciful manner: and if anything can lead you to repentance, it must be the startling conviction that your neck is thus humanely withdrawn by my hand from the halter into which you had thrust it. I would, however, much rather you should live to experience a sincere contrition, than that you should be hurried from the world with all your iniquities upon your head. You have behaved like a ferocious and cold-blooded savage towards me—you were hurrying me to the tomb by means of your black arts—and you were ministering to the fiendish vengeance of a guilty young creature whom you should have counselled and guided in a better path. Nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand, placed in my position, would have remorselessly handed you over to the officials of justice—aye, and would have even rejoiced to behold your quivering form suspended to the fatal beam. But I have spared you: and your secret is safe with me. Not a word calculated to injure you shall pass my lips: I will not deprive you of the means of earning your bread—for *that* would be only to force you back into the ways of crime, despite perhaps of the inclination which you may now cherish to repent sincerely and truly for the past. Prove, then, that you are deserving of this mercy at my hands, and adopt such a course of life, during the few years which remain to you, as will atone for those misdeeds that unfortunately cannot be recalled. Farewell, Mrs. Lindley—and may this lesson be as salutary as it is terrible."

"Heaven knows I never can forget your goodness, nor cease to reflect upon the words which have just fallen from your lips," murmured the midwife in a suffocating tone.

"God grant that the impression my be permanent," said Eaton; and he hurriedly quitted the house, the atmosphere of which seemed painful for him to breathe.

When he was gone, Mrs. Lindley threw herself back in her arm-chair, and gave way to a long train of thoughts. Terror had so subdued and unnerved her that, while the young man was in her presence, and even for a considerable time after he had taken his departure, she was profoundly touched by the sense of her own abominable wickedness and by his unparalleled generosity. But as the effects of that tremendous fear gradually subsided, her heart elapsed into its wonted callosity—even as the lava, which the volcano's raging fire, melts with liquid softness, hardens and cools down into impenetrable rock.

At the expiration of an hour from the time that Eaton left her, she fortified herself with a strong cordial; and then repairing to her own private chamber, she opened her strong box, and counted the piles of gold which she had amassed. Oh! how speedily—how completely are the better feelings of human nature crushed and hidden beneath the weight of riches: how easily does the smitten conscience experience an anodyne in the ill-gotten wages of iniquity! Thus was it with this diabolical hag;—and ere mid-day she chuckled over her gold—chuckled over her impunity—chuckled over the narrow escape which she had that forenoon seen!

Hours passed away—the shades of evening crept slowly upon the hemisphere—and soon after dusk a sharp and impatient knock was heard at the front-door.

Mrs. Lindley hastened to answer the summons; and a lady, enveloped in a mantle and closely veiled, entered the passage.

The midwife said nothing: for she knew who the visitor was;—and she led her immediately into the parlour, the door of which she closed carefully.

The lady raised her veil and revealed the countenance of Fernanda Aylmer,—that countenance which was still pale and colourless, but which now wore an expression of firmness and decision.

"You did not expect me so soon again, my dear Mrs. Lindley?" said the young lady as she seated herself near the blazing fire—for the weather was penetratingly cold without.

"I did not: but I knew you were there the instant that I opened the door," responded the midwife. "What has brought you hither this evening?"

"You shall soon know," answered the lady of angelic beauty and of demoniac heart. "In a word, then, I have seen Arthur Eaton—and I am convinced that Dudley is playing us false."

"And yet it was he himself who announced to us, yesterday morning, that Mr. Eaton was gradually—nay, almost rapidly—recovering his health," observed Mrs. Lindley. "How can you reconcile this fact with the idea that he is deceiving us?"

"Listen to me patiently for a few moments," returned Miss Aylmer. "When you received that letter yesterday morning, in which Dudley informed you that his young master was, by some unaccountable means, triumphing over the poison nightly administered to him in the water placed by his bed-side, I asked you particularly if you thought the poison could in course of time lose its effects. You answered me emphatically in the negative. With this assurance in my mind, I could still perceive three distinct ways of accounting for the alteration in Arthur's outward appearance. The first was that the near approach of death was heralded by a hectic glow on the cheeks which Dudley had mistaken for the returning hue of health:

—the second was that Arthur had discovered the cause of his malady and was taking the antidote!—and the third was that Dudley no longer administered to him the poison."

"All these considerations I likewise weighed in my own mind," observed Mrs. Lindley: "and while I rejected the last, I wavered between the two first."

"And I fluctuated amidst all three," returned Fernanda. "Well, in that state of uncertainty and suspense—resolved not to abandon my vengeance, and yet fearful that it would escape me—I determined to leave your house, take a lodging as close to Lord Marchmont's mansion as possible, and satisfy myself with my own eyes as to the alteration which had occurred in Arthur's appearance. Moreover, I was anxious to see Dudley, tax him with deceiving me, and judge by his replies how far my suspicions on that head were well founded. Accordingly I obtained apartments in the very next house to that where Arthur dwells with his father. I slept in my new lodging last night. This morning I enveloped myself in my cloak, concealed my face with this thick black veil, and walked about Hanover Square until near mid-day. Presently I saw my seducer approaching. He was proceeding at a slow pace, and was apparently buried in deep thought. I obtained a full view of his countenance: but he noticed me not:—and even if he had observed, he could not have recognised me. Oh! he is indeed altered in appearance, Mrs. Lindley," continued the vindictive young lady, the words hissing between her teeth from the rage that filled her bosom: "for it was no hectic tint which dyed his cheeks—no unnatural brilliancy which shone in his eyes! His step, too, was comparatively firm and elastic;—and every symptom—every sign denoted returning health. I went back to my lodgings, and reflected on all this. My first hypothesis was destroyed: it was a resuscitating vigour, and not an approaching dissolution, which had produced that change in his appearance! Then I thought of my second theory. Could he have discovered the secret of his malady? could he have obtained the antidote? No—for if this were the case, his suspicions would have fallen upon *me*, and ere now I should have been the inmate of a criminal gaol. What, then, can I believe? That Dudley has repented and has ceased to administer the poison!"

"I have heard you with patience, my dear young lady, because you requested that I would do so," said Mrs. Lindley. "But it is now my turn to speak. Arthur Eaton was here this morning?"

"Ah! and for what purpose?" demanded Fernanda.

"He has discovered everything—and pardoned everything!" replied Mrs. Lindley, in a low but impressive tone. "Poison and antidote are alike known to him—and Dudley has *not* deceived you."

"You amaze me!" ejaculated Miss Aylmer, now painfully excited.

"Hush!" not so loud—the walls have ears!" whispered the old harridan, impatiently. "Yes, he has discovered all; he came hither to see you upon some matter of importance, but the nature of which he would not reveal to me—and he was surprised when he found that you were gone. Last night he was with your uncle and the Countess ——"

"I care not for them—my vengeance is the sentiment that absorbs all other considerations!" interrupted Miss Aylmer, impatiently. "How came he to discover the secret of his malady!—how came he to possess the antitode!"

"The night that he was here with the Countess of Desborough, he found the receipts in that bookcase," answered Mrs. Lindley; "and a chemist has doubtless been consulted. He said that for *your* sake he would spare *me*—and his language was kind and considerate respecting yourself."

"Oh! I scorn his kindness—I contemn his forbearance!" exclaimed Fernanda, every lineament of her beauteous countenance convulsed with rage. "Think you that my revenge shall pause it its progress here?—do you imagine for a single moment that I am to be melted by his pardon—soothed by his forgiveness? No—no: it is not thus that Fernanda Aylmer buries her wrongs in oblivion!"

And she rose no depart.

"What are you about to do, my dear young lady!" demanded Mrs. Lindley, in an imploring tone. "Consider—pause—reflect, I beseech you! Any attempt you make upon Mr. Eaton's life, may redound with fearful consequences on ourselves. Oh! do nothing rashly or hastily, I entreat you! His forbearance may yield to exasperation—his merciful spirit may be moved to retaliation! Nay, to ensure his personal safety, he may be induced to invoke the assistance of the law—and then you involve *me* in *your* destruction!"

"Fear nothing, good woman," said Fernanda, in a cold and resolute tone: "whatever I may now do, shall be done well and effectually. I see that William Dudley is faithful: aided by him my vengeance will be consummated in a moment. There! give me a phial of some deadly poison for that gold!" she exclaimed, throwing a heavy purse upon the table.

"Hush! the very walls have ears," murmured the midwife, in a hoarse and hollow whisper. "My God! you would destroy me, body and soul, Miss Aylmer: have mercy upon me!"

"Well—for a tenth portion of this amount of gold a chemist will supply me with what I require," said Fernanda, coolly, as she took the purse up again.

"Stay—I will do it!" moaned rather than spoke the midwife, her avarice getting the better of her fears.

"Be quick, then—for I am anxious to depart," said the young lady.

Mrs. Lindley quitted the room—hastened up to her own private chamber—and speedily returned with a small phial in her hand. This she gave to Fernanda, from whom she received the gold in exchange.

"The potion may be relied upon?" enquired Miss Aylmer, with a significant look.

"Death will be almost instantaneous if only three drops be poured between the lips of a sleeping person," answered the midwife, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"You are not deceiving me, Mrs. Lindley?" exclaimed Fernanda, eyeing the woman suspiciously.

"On my soul, I entertained not such an idea for a moment!" returned the midwife.

"We will see," said Miss Aylmer coolly; and as she spoke she caught up the great black cat in her arms.

"Young lady, I forbid you to injure that animal!" cried Mrs. Lindley, in a far louder and more excited tone than she was accustomed to speak. "Put it down again, I say!"

And she endeavoured to wrest the cat from Fernanda's grasp.

"Be quiet—I command you!" exclaimed Miss Aylmer. "We shall disturb the house——"

"True—my God!" murmured the midwife, falling back into her chair.

At the same moment the cruel and merciless young lady forced the orifice of the bottle into the cat's mouth; and poured a considerable quantity of the fluid down its throat. Then, rising suddenly from her seat, she let the animal drop upon the rug, where it lay motionless; and the atmosphere of the room was impregnated with a strong odour of almonds.

"Now are you satisfied?" demanded Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of gloomy rage. "The poor animal was killed in a moment—as if struck by lightning."

"I am sorry that I should have deprived you of a favourite, my good friend," responded Fernanda, almost gaily—so pleased was she at the result of her experiment: "but I can assure you that I am much happier now that I have acquired the certainty of consummating my vengeance at any moment. Farewell, Mrs. Lindley: you need fear nothing."

"Will you not see your friend Caroline Walters, before you leave?" inquired the midwife.

"Not this evening—not this evening," answered Miss Aylmer, impatiently: "I am in too great a hurry to see your relative, William Dudley."

The young lady then took her departure.

As soon as she was gone the midwife lifted the dead cat from the rug: and as she did this, a heavy sigh escaped from her breast. For this infernal old hag, who held human life as naught, and who without compunction could cast a new-born child to the deep waters of the Thames,—this fiendish wretch found her heart moved to compassion by the fate of a favourite cat! Nay, more—she descended into her back kitchen; and raising a stone with some sharp instrument, she dug a hole with a fire-shovel, and interred the cat then and there. And as she threw back the earth, a tear fell from her eye: for she remembered how the huge beast had loved her, and how it was wont to purr when she caressed it. But never, when making away with an infant babe, had the vile old harridan paused to reflect how sweetly it would smile and how prettily its little chin would wreathe into dimples, if it were only permitted to live!

Yes—it was with all the solemnity of a funeral, apart from the prayers and the coffin, that the detestable midwife thus buried her great black cat;—and let not the reader wonder at this incident, nor deem it exaggerated—for not many years have elapsed since that mighty hero, the valorous Field-Marshal Prince Albert, interred his dog Eos with almost Christian obsequies in the grounds attached to Windsor Castle!

Having disposed of the corpse of her cat, Mrs. Lindley returned to the parlour and sat down to reflect upon the dangers which she was likely to incur from the new step that Fernanda Aylmer was taking. At length her fears increased to such an extent, that she was resolved to adopt some energetic proceeding in order to warn Arthur Eaton of his danger.

Her measures were soon decided upon. She would repair at once to Lord Marchmont's mansion and obtain an interview with that nobleman's son. But then, might she not encounter her relation, William Dudley?—and, allured by the gold of Fernanda Aylmer, would not this individual betray to the young lady the circumstance of the old midwife's visit?

Yes:—this was a difficulty, however, that was not insurmountable; and, opening her desk, Mrs. Lindley penned the following letter:—

"I am waiting in a hackney-coach close by. If you value your safety come out and speak to me. I have something of the utmost importance to communicate. But you must not allow William Dudley to learn that I am so near.

"THE MIDWIFE OF FORE STREET."

Having sealed this letter, she addressed it in a feigned hand to the Hon Arthur Eaton, writing the word "*Private*" on the envelope. Then, muffling herself up in a cloak, the hood of which she drew over her head, Mrs. Lindley sallied forth—took a hackney coach at the nearest stand—and ordered the driver to proceed to Hanover Square.

In due time the vehicle stopped according to her instructions, within a short distance of Lord Marchmont's mansion; and the coachman delivered the note at the front door. Several minutes elapsed, during which Mrs. Lindley remained in torturing suspense. Mr. Eaton might not be at home—perhaps he would not return until very late—and, in this case, what was she to do? The murder might be accomplished before morning; and justice might eventually trace out her complicity in the deed?

But these reflections were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the Hon. Arthur Eaton; and Mrs. Lindley, leaning forward so that her lips almost touched his ear at the window of the vehicle, said in a low, hoarse whisper, "Fernanda has been with me this evening—and she is resolved upon your death. A poison which kills its victim as if he were struck by a thunderbolt, is in her possession; and she will not scruple to use it."

"I thank you sincerely—most sincerely for this information," answered Mr. Eaton, in the same subdued tone. "Now you have given me a proof of better feelings on your part—and you shall not repent your altered conduct. Farewell."

With these words he hurried back into the mansion; and the vehicle immediately drove away.

CHAPTER L.

THE POISONERS.

IT was midnight—deep midnight, as proclaimed by all the clocks in the vast metropolis; and a profound silence reigned throughout the mansion of Lord Marchmont in Hanover Square.

But, hark!—a door, slightly creaking on its hinges, opens on one of the upper storeys; and a man, who has not laid aside his clothes, nor thought of retiring to his couch, comes forth. He bears in one hand a candle, which he shades with the other; and the light shines upon the countenance of William Dudley.

There is an unnatural pallor upon those cheeks usually florid and healthy: a sinister gleaming appears in the eyes that are wont to have so meek and placid an expression!—and the whole aspect of the man denotes a troubled mind.

He starts at his own shadow, which seems a tall black spectre creeping after him along the passage wall: now he pauses and hesitates—his avarice weighs in the balance against his fears—and a straw shall turn the scale.

Oh! on such occasions how seldom is it that the better feelings of the human breast obtain the victory. The valet has calculated Fernanda's gold in contrast with the value of his master's life and the risk he runs in aiding her to take it;—and he pursues his way!

He descends the stairs—stopping frequently to listen as the steps creak beneath him;—and now he is again startled by his own shadow as it appears to chase him round an angle which he is turning.

But at last he gains the hall: and, placing the light in a niche, he cautiously and noiselessly opens the front-door.

A lady, with a thick black veil over her countenance, instantly enters the mansion; and William Dudley closes the door.

"Did any one observe you, Miss!" demanded the valet, in a whisper which, though scarcely audible, expressed the most intense anxiety and alarm.

"The square was utterly deserted," answered Fernanda. "You have nothing to fear—and yet you seem to tremble like a leaf."

"Why, Miss—to tell you the truth, when I was a little boy my father, who was a good man, used to tell me that the eye of God saw everything; and it really does appear to me as if God's looks were fixed upon me now."

These words were delivered in a very low but impressive voice; and for an instant Fernanda Aylmer was staggered by their force. But speedily recovering herself, she placed a heavy bag in the valet's hands, saying, "Twice the promised amount shall be yours to-morrow, if you only enable me to succeed to-night!"

And William Dudley, securing the gold about his person, took the candle from the niche and led the way up-stairs without uttering another word.

That man had bartered his soul for gold: it was like selling his God—since he knew that the Almighty's eye was upon him. Had he been an atheist, his crime were less—because he would not then have believed that he was sinning against his Maker and violating heaven's own blessed laws. But he was a Christian in faith—he had faith, too, in that heaven and in a juxta-existing hell—and yet he dared to lend himself to a deed of murder!

When the well-educated sin, their iniquity is ten thousand times greater than that of the poor ignorant peasant or unlettered operative;—and therefore are the backslidings of Royalty and Aristocracy offences more positively heinous and damnable than even the blackest deeds which the uneducated poor ever perpetrate. Adultery (a vice so common in the upper classes) on the part of a titled lady deserves a larger measure of God's wrath than even infanticide on the part of an ignorant young woman belonging to the lowest grade;—and drunkenness in a peer is worse than theft in a peasant.

But while we are pausing to make these reflections—(and the disgusting demoralization of the British Aristocracy never can be exposed too often)—William Dudley and Fernanda Aylmer have gained the landing which communicates with Arthur Eaton's chamber.

Slowly—gradually—noiselessly did the perfidious valet turn the handle of the door; and in a few moments Fernanda Aylmer crossed the threshold of the apartment, followed by her accomplice.

Eaton was in bed; and his eyes were closed—apparently in profound slumber. The candles were burning upon the night-table; an open book showed that the young man had been reading. All was silent—solemnly silent, save the regular respiration of the occupant of the couch;—for both Fernanda and William Dudley held their breath through the fear of awakening their intended victim.

Taking the phial from the bosom of her dress, Miss Aylmer raised her veil and advanced towards the bed, with a step so light that it seemed as if she were treading upon the air, and not upon the floor.

But the instant that she reached the foot of the couch, Eaton sprang up to a sitting posture, exclaiming, "Fernanda—Dudley—attempt not to escape, or I will alarm the house, and hand you both over to the officers of justice!"

The valet rushed forward and threw himself upon his knees by the bed-side—his countenance ghastly with terror and remorse; while Fernanda amazed and stupified, was rivetted to the spot—her eyes staring wildly upon the countenance of Arthur Eaton, as if she could scarcely believe that he was indeed awake, and that her diabolical scheme had failed signally.

"Rise, sir, and hear me attentively," said the young gentleman in a stern and commanding tone to his valet;—"and you, Fernanda, compose yourself as well as you can—for our conference, unseasonable though the hour is, may perhaps be a long one."

"And if I refuse to remain here another moment?" cried Miss Aylmer, endeavouring to veil her bitter disappointment and rage beneath an assumed tone of haughty confidence.

"I shall ring this bell violently," answered Eaton;—"you will be stopped upon the stairs—and I would then abandon you to your fate."

"And if I remain, what am I to expect at your hands?" demanded the young lady.

"Mercy—pardon—forgiveness," he responded, in an altered and softened voice.

"I shall remain to hear all you may have to say," returned Fernanda: "but I scorn your mercy—despise your pardon—contemn your forgiveness."

"Be seated, and listen to me with patience," said Eaton: then, addressing himself to the valet, who had risen from his knees, and was standing near the foot of the bed, he added, "And you, also, William, give me your attention."

Miss Aylmer took a chair—for she felt worn out with the excitement and fatigues which she had undergone during the last few hours.

"You are both no doubt prepared to learn that your guilt is known to me in all its details," resumed Arthur Eaton. "Accident threw in my way two receipts,—the one a poison—the other its antidote. A chemist explained to me their nature and effects, and the same moment that revealed to me the cause of my mysterious malady, placed in my hands the means of cure. Sixteen days have elapsed since then; and already I have been enabled, under

heaven's mercy, to wrestle successfully with death. But every night, William Dudley, has your hand impregnated with poison the beverage placed by my side; and every morning have you found the decanter empty. Think not, however, that I imbibed the contents: no—it is the antidote which I have taken instead! And now you marvel wherefore I have remained thus silent—thus patient—thus tranquil during these sixteen days: you wonder why I have foreborne from invoking the aid of the law to punish those who sought to send me to an early grave? I will explain to you my motives for this forbearance. Associated as you are, William Dudley, with this young lady in the black designs which heaven's intervention has made abortive, you are of course no stranger to the cause—the unhappy cause—of her burning animosity against me. Alas! I know that I have wronged her—deeply wronged her; and I will not advance a single reason to palliate my perfidy and my crime. I will admit that I have been both perfidious and criminal;—and it is therefore for *her* sake that I have hitherto cherished in my own bosom the tremendous secrets which constitute the history of my lingering malady and providential cure. Had I given you, William Dudley, up to justice—had I taken a constable to the house of your relative in Fore Street, for the purpose of consigning *her* to a criminal gaol—I could not in justice have spared Miss Aylmer. And even if I had spared her, there were a thousand chances that the arrest of her accomplices would have led to the elucidation of her guilt. For *her* sake, therefore, I have held my peace—for *her* sake I shall still remain silent. Not even my beloved father suspects aught of all this;—no—nor even your uncle and the Countess," he added, turning towards Fernanda.

The young lady showed by a slight inclination of the head that she heard and understood him: but not a syllable fell from her lips.

"And now, William Dudley," continued Arthur, after a short pause, "you may wonder that I should have still retained you in my service during the last sixteen days. I had two objects in contemplation by thus acting. The first was to ascertain whether the spectacle of your young master recovering health and strength, after reaching the very verge of the grave, and retracing the path to life and vigour in spite of the venom which you had infused into his veins,—I was anxious, I say, to satisfy myself whether such a spectacle would move your heart—touch you with remorse—and awaken better feelings within your soul. Had this trial resulted in your favour, I should yet have entertained the hope that you were not past redemption: I should have considered that it was well worth while to attempt the salvation of a fellow-creature in such a case. Then, in due time, I should have taken you by the hand—and I should have said, '*Dudley, I know all! But you have repented—and I forgive the past as sincerely as if it had never been!*'—Alas! it is not in my power thus to address you. Night after night has the poison been mixed with the beverage placed by my side; and morning after morning has the chemist said to me, '*The water is envenomed still!*' And now, as if to crown your tremendous guilt, you seek my chamber in the middle of the night—with what intent I need not tell you, miserable man that you are!"

"Mercy—mercy, Mr. Eaton! My God! spare me!" moaned the wretched Dudley, again sinking on his knees and joining his hands in entreaty—while the horrible workings of his countenance bore dread testimony to the nature of the emotions that were excited in his breast.

"I have already informed you that it is my intention to spare you, so far as the law is concerned," said Arthur, scarcely able to conquer a sensation of loathing and abhorrence in respect to the man in whom he had been so cruelly deceived. "Rise, sir—rise, I command you—and hear me out."

The valet resumed his standing posture at the foot of the bed: but his eyes were cast down—for he was unable to look in the face of that young man who had been so kind a master, and towards whom he had acted as a veritable fiend.

And all this while Fernanda remained seated, motionless as a statue—and as a statue pale and glacial in outward appearance: but heaven alone can tell how dire—how terrible were the feelings that agitated in her upheaved bosom.

"I have now explained my first motive for retaining you in my service since the day on which I discovered your guilt," resumed Mr. Eaton, continuing to address himself to the valet, on whose ears his words fell with a power and effect that shook him to the lowest confines of his being: and yet Arthur's language flowed in a calm—measured—unexcited strain; as if it were an unbiased and merciful judge who was speaking. "My second motive," he continued, "was intimately associated with my intentions respecting Miss Aylmer; and as it appears that you have no secrets with each other, I will speak frankly and openly. Know then, Fernanda, that I went this morning to Mrs. Lindley's house in order to obtain an interview with you; and my object was to offer you my hand."

The young lady started at this strange announcement: but, instantly recovering herself, she said in a tone of icy coldness, "It is well that you take to yourself credit for a deed of generosity, now that you may safely vaunt it without being expected to repeat the proposal."

"I take Almighty God to witness that such is the truth—the solemn truth!" exclaimed Arthur Eaton, emphatically. "Would you have other evidence thereof in addition to my word, seek your uncle the Earl of Desborough—seek the Countess—and ask them to tell you all I said to them last evening."

"You doubtless told them that I was a poisoner—but that you would forgive me!" returned the young lady, with a bitterness and a malignity which showed how relentless and diabolical was her hatred towards him whom she had once loved with such an impassioned fervour.

"No, Fernanda," rejoined Arthur: "had I thought of betraying you to your nearest relatives, I should not have hesitated to give you up to justice. But I reasoned within the secret depths of my own soul—and I reflected that I had wronged you—that I had driven you to the desperation which prompted you to wreak so terrible a retribution—and that it was for me to make amends. Therefore did I hasten this morning to Fore Street; and had I found you in that place still, I should have said, '*Fernanda, God is giving me back my health; and in a few weeks I shall be perfectly resuscitated. Again do I offer you my hand; and now you cannot accuse me of an anxiety to make an atonement only when under the influence of that remorse which heralds an approaching dissolution. Be generous, Fernanda, even as I seek to be just: let us forget the past, and live in hope of a happier future.*'—Thus should I have spoken; and if you had still refused to accept the only amends which lay in my power to propose, at all events a weight would have been removed from my conscience. I should not have revealed to you the fact that I had discovered the secret of my malady and that you were the cause: no—that secret would have accompanied me to the tomb; and if you had proved a good wife to me, never should a word or look on my part have led you to suspect that your past iniquity was so fully known in all its details to me. I should have been happy in your repentance—your contrition;—and I should have considered that I had saved a soul from that eternal ruin towards which my own conduct had driven it in the beginning to take the first step. Now, therefore, you can understand, William Dudley," added Arthur Eaton, once more turning to the valet, "my second motive for hitherto retaining you in my service. For as it was my intention to keep from Miss Aylmer the circumstance that I had discovered the cause of my malady, I should likewise have observed the same profound secrecy in that respect towards yourself."

"Oh! my good kind master, what a wretch I have been!" exclaimed the valet, wringing his hands, while tears trickled down his cheeks.

"Peace, drivelling fool!" ejaculated Fernanda, turning sharply round upon him.

"Nay—speak not thus," said Arthur Eaton, in a severe tone of rebuke, as he fixed his eyes almost sternly upon Miss Aylmer. "Would to God that words of contrition might come from *your* lips!"

"Never!" cried the young lady, starting from her chair. "I see that you have turned a saint, Arthur Eaton—perhaps a hypocrite—and I now

despise you, in addition to all the unconquerable hatred which my heart cherishes, and will ever cherish towards you."

With these words she turned abruptly away and advanced to the door.

The young man spoke not a syllable to detain her;—and she took her departure.

A long silence then ensued in the chamber,—Arthur Eaton lying back upon the pillows of his couch and giving way to his reflections, which on *her* account were painful in the extreme—and the valet still standing, a piteous object of mingled shame and remorse, near the bed.

"Dudley," at length said his generous master, "am I to believe that you are sincerely and truly penitent for the black iniquity in which you have been made an accomplice?"

"On my soul, dear sir, I could wish that it were all undone—that I could again be the innocent man I was ere temptation came in my way!" was the prompt and impressive answer. "Here is the gold which I received as an earnest of this night's contemplated crime," he continued, throwing the heavy bag upon the table near him; "and here," he added, drawing forth some papers from his pocket-book, "are the Bank receipts for other monies which I have at different times received from Miss Aylmer."

"Now am I assured that your repentance is sincere, William," said Mr. Eaton. "For the present I will take charge of those wages of iniquity: to-morrow I will tell you how they shall be employed. Retire to your own chamber—and fear not that I shall treat you with severity. No—it is my purpose to afford you every opportunity of making your peace with heaven and becoming an useful member of society."

The man threw himself upon his knees—took his master's hand—conveyed it to his lips—wept plenteously over it—and endeavoured to express his gratitude and his penitence—but could not; for his voice was lost in profound sobs. He was deeply—deeply affected: and Eaton spoke kindly and feelingly to him.

At length William Dudley withdrew to his own chamber: but ere he sought his couch, he prayed long and fervently.

CHAPTER LI.

MRS. PIGGLEBERRY AND HER LODGERS.

It was nine o'clock in the evening of the day following the incidents just related: and Tim Meagles was seated in the parlour at his lodgings, discussing rum-punch, and conversing with the Amazon who occupied a chair near him. Indeed, Mr. Meagles was placed on one side of the hearth, and his fair friend on the other; and while he drank the steaming liquor from a tumbler, she sipped her allowance from a wine-glass. We must also observe that the gentleman was smoking a full-flavoured havannah; and the lady was indulging in a Spanish cigarette, the tobacco of which it was formed being of so mild a flavour that there was no danger of its marring the fragrance of her breath or dimming the dazzling brilliancy of her fine teeth.

The fire burnt cheerfully in the grate—the lamp diffused a rich mellow light through the apartment—the thick curtains were closed—the atmosphere was warm—and everything was comfortable, although the air was piercing cold without and the snow was falling in thick flakes.

"Well, Joe Warren and his friends seem to have got themselves into a precious scrape at last, Letitia," observed Meagles, throwing himself back in his chair and watching the blue wreaths of thin smoke that curled upward from his cigar. "Committed for trial yesterday—sent to Newgate——"

"And Warren is placed in a cell by himself as a very desperate character," interrupted the Amazon.

"Yes—and this morning's paper also says that he is heavily ironed," added Meagles. "Well, I am really sorry for him: he is a brave fellow, and faithful to those who employ him. At least, so I have heard. But as for the Big Beggarman—the scoundrel who played you and me that scurvy trick at his vile den in Horsleydown—I am glad he is in for it."

"So am I," rejoined Lady Lade. "But only fancy that man Page having been so active in the process of giving the party up to justice: for I suppose it is the same who sold us the missing half of the certificate the other day?"

"The very same," answered Meagles. "When he called and proposed to sell it, he told me that he wished to conclude the bargain at once, as he wanted to be off to Aylesbury on very particular business; and he mentioned the name of Sir Richard Stamford at the time."

"Then Mr. Page is assuredly a very shrewd fellow," observed the Amazon. "He received a thousand guineas from us, for the half of the document; and now he is feathering his nest by means of the services he is rendering the baronet."

"No doubt of it. But what an extraordinary history is Sir Richard Stamford's," continued Meagles. "A few weeks ago the whole country was ringing with the awful crimes he had committed—murder, fraud, forgery, arson, and heaven knows what: and now, all of a sudden, he makes his innocence as apparent as the sun at noon-day. Indeed the evidence which was given yesterday at Bow Street was overwhelming against Martin and Ramsey as the real forgers, and also as having put a quantity of spurious coin into circulation. Then the kidnapping of Sir Richard and Mr. Page was equally well proven against Warren and the Big Beggarman; and a fellow called Briggs was shown to have played the part of gaoler at the house in Thacker's Court."

"If that were all that was brought forward against Warren—I mean the kidnapping business—he would get off with transportation or imprisonment," said the Amazon: "but up jumps the indefatigable and universal Mr. Page to prove a highway robbery against him."

"A *highway* robbery, committed in a *lane* leading out of the Edgeware Road," observed Meagles, laughingly.

"Well—the law makes a *lane* a *highway* for its own special purposes, you great booby," returned the Amazon.

"So I am afraid poor Warren will find to his cost," answered Meagles. "The whole gang of them will be tried this week, or the beginning of next. I shall certainly go to the Old Bailly and hear the proceedings."

At this moment, a low and timid knock was heard

at the door; and Meagles, as if to inspire the individual with courage, shouted out "Come in!" at the very top of his voice.

The door opened slowly—and an elderly woman, dressed in black, and having a respectable appearance, entered the room.

"Well, Mrs. Piggleberry, what news?" inquired Meagles, as he caught a glimpse of his landlady's countenance, which was broad, ruddy, and good-tempered in expression.

"Nothink partickler, sir," she answered, in a mincing tone and with a low curtsey: "leastways it's of no very great importance; only Mr. Brogden, which lives on the second floor front, would be much obleeged if you'd be so kind as to have the goodness to take the trouble to tell Master Wasp to give him his vig—because he's afeard of catching cold if he stays much longer without it."

"His wig!—Mr. Brogden's wig!" exclaimed Meagles, laughing heartily—his mirth being echoed by that of Lady Letitia Lade.

"Well, it *is* funny, sir," said Mrs. Piggleberry, thinking it right to laugh also. "But Master Wasp is a dear delightful boy, and full of sperrets, to be sure. Only if he would be so condescending as to give Mr. Brogden back his vig, I should feel so much obleeged."

"But how came Wasp with the wig at all?" demanded Meagles.

"Why, my dear good sir," responded Mrs. Piggleberry, approaching the table in a deferential manner, "as Mr. Brogden was a-going up stairs to his room this evening about six o'clock, that sweet playful creetur' Master Wasp let down a long bit of string over the bannisters on the second floor; and as the string happened to have a fish-hook at the end, it very naturally come in contack with Mr Brogden's vig. Well, I s'pose, Master Wasp give a pull,—and away went the vig, and Mr. Brogden went up after it—but, behold ye! Master Wasp was indiskiverable. So Mr. Brogden rushes into his room and rings the bell with a wiolence that makes me think the house was a-fire; and I runs up to see where it was a-blazin'. But there wasn't no fire—only Mr. Brogden's vig a-missin'—and he, poor gentleman! obleeged to put on his cotton night-cap. So I begged him not to kick up a rumpus, as I know'd Mr. Lade, sir, was with you, and I wouldn't have you disturbed on no account whatsomever. But as Master Wasp only laughs in his sweet playful way when I ask him about the vig, and as Mr. Brogden says he'll come down and speak to you, sir, I thought it best just to step in and tell—leastways, to hint that, perhaps Master Wasp won't mind givin' up the vig if so be you would have the goodness to be so kind as to take the trouble to ask him."

"Order Wasp to come up to me directly, Mrs. Piggleberry," exclaimed Meagles, who, as well as the Amazon, had been convulsed with laughter, during the whole time the landlady was explaining her second-floor lodger's misadventure.

"Now pray don't scold the dear boy, sir!" said the worthy woman in a beseeching tone. "He's such a nice youth—so amiable and all that——"

"Well, go down, then, Mrs. Piggleberry," interrupted Meagles, "and tell him that he must take up Mr. Brogden's wig at once, with a handsome apology. But wait a moment, my good creature," added Tim, a thought striking him: "who's that sanctified-looking gentleman that has taken your third floor?"

"Lord bless ye, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Piggleberry, clasping her hands and turning up the whites of her eyes; "that's a very pious man—and I do raly think his presence will bring a blessin' upon my house. He come down into the kitchen this mornin', sir, and said so many good things to me and Jemimy—that's the servint-gal, you know, sir—that we both whimpered for an hour; and he gave us some religious tracks, as he calls 'em, sir, and told us to peroose 'em with attention, and they'd be the salvation of us."

"And pray who is this pious gentleman, Mrs. Piggleberry?" asked Meagles, exchanging a sly smile with the Amazon, who was greatly amused by the landlady's description of her new lodger.

"Well, sir, I can't say I exactly understand what he is," was the response: "but he told me when he took the vacant floor that he was a *New Light*. Perhaps you know what that means, sir?" added Mrs. Piggleberry, in a submissive and deferential tone.

"May I be hanged if I do!" exclaimed Meagles. "But what is his name?"

"The Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, sir," answered the widow.

"Ah! then he belongs to some religious sect called *New Lights*," said Lady Letitia Lade, with a merry laugh. "But what on earth could have induced him to take a lodging in one of the most fashionable quarters of the West End?"

"Well, sir," answered Mrs. Piggleberry, addressing herself to the Amazon, whom, be it remembered, she invariably called *Mr. Lade*—for the good widow was too discreet to suffer it to appear that she recognised the sex of her best lodger's constant companion,—"Well, sir, I raly can't satisfy you on that pint. But I know that the reverend gentleman has plenty of money: for he paid me a quarter in advance—and it seems he possesses a good friend in one Salem: because he says, says he, as he counted down the guineas, '*It's all through that blessed Salem I'm able to set up my staff in your taybernacle, my Christian sister.*'—So you see, sir, he calls my house a taybernacle, for which I'm very much obleeged to him: for I know it's a holy word and carries a blessin' along with it. Ah! Mr. Sneaksby is a very good man—a very pious gentleman," continued the widow, shaking her head solemnly. "This afternoon a fine carriage stops at the door—and a great tall handsome livery-servant helps out two fat old ladies, so magnificently dressed;—and Mr. Sneaksby comes down into the hall to receive them—and he gives 'em each a buss on both cheeks, which he called '*the kiss of peace.*' Then he leads them up stairs; and the bell rings. I answer it myself; because just at that moment Jemimy was a-polishin' the fenders and cleaning the sarsepans, and was as black as a tinker and not fit to be seen. So Mr. Sneaksby orders me to get two bottles of wine and some nice sweet biscuits; and one of the ladies gives me a guinea to pay for 'em. Well, when I went up again with the wine and the cakes, the reverend gentleman and the two ladies was all three a-cryin' bitterly, and beatin' their buxxims, and calling themselves '*miserable sinners*,' and '*unsavoury wessels*, and '*flesh-pots of Egypt*,' and a lot of hard names which I don't recolleck now. I

quite made me whimper myself to see such good people blackguarding their own selves in such a outrageous fashion; and thinkin' that the sooner they got into better sperrets the more they'd be pleased, I draw'd the corks and poured out the wine. But when I handed it to the fust lady, she groaned awful, shaked her head, and exclaimed, '*I ain't worthy of it!*'—Then I went to t'other lady; and she groaned more awfuller still, and said the same thing. But Mr. Sneaksby says, says he, '*Yes, my Christian sisters; you may take it for your stomach's sake, as Timothy did.*'—And so I suppose the poor dear ladies was troubled with the colic; and they drank off the wine without no more hesitation. I then left 'em; and they returned to their devotions——"

"How do you know *that*, Mrs. Piggleberry?" inquired Meagles.

"Why, sir," answered the widow, blushing and growing embarrassed; "to tell the truth I listened at the door for a little bit—for I was afeard the ladies would do themselves a mischief through beatin' their buxsims so unmerciful."

"And did they exchange any more *kisses of peace?*" asked Lady Letitia, perfectly enjoying Mrs. Piggleberry's description.

"Yes—a many, sir," responded the good woman, ingenuously. "The ladies remained with Mr. Sneaksby for an hour; and then they went away in their carriage. But they was so overcome with their feelin's that they could scarcely walk straight—and they was evidently staggerin' under the weight of wery painful emotions."

"Did they finish the two bottles of wine?" demanded Meagles, exchanging a sly look with the Amazon.

"Oh! yes, sir—every drop," answered Mrs. Piggleberry.

"Ah! then we can pretty well guess what sort of emotions they were staggering under," observed Meagles, drily.

The landlady affected not to catch this remark: for it was a principle—or rather a prudential reservation—with her, never to observe or seem to hear anything that tended to the disparagement of those lodgers who paid her well and allowed her free access to their cupboards and trunks.

"Now, then, my good woman," said Meagles, "you can go and settle that little business between Mr. Brogden and my young scamp of a page, Wasp."

"Thank'ee kindly, sir, for the trouble you've taken in the little trifling matter," returned Mrs. Piggleberry, who had not, however, much to be grateful for—seeing that Mr. Meagles had not even stirred from his seat to procure the restoration of Mr. Brogden's peruque.

The landlady curtseyed and left the room; and the moment the door closed behind her, Tim Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade burst each into a violent fit of laughter.

"Well, upon my honour," exclaimed the former, as soon as his mirth had so far subsided as to allow him to give utterance to his thoughts, "this is the finest fun I ever heard in all my life. The new lodger is evidently some sanctified scoundrel whom amorous old dowagers run after. We must invite him to pass an evening with us, my beauty."

"Capital!" cried the Amazon, who had laughed till the tears ran down her flushed cheeks, where they resembled pearls upon rose-leaves. "But I must leave you now, Tim," she added, after a brief pause. "Sir John made me promise that I would return to sup with him; and as he so generously gave me the money we required to buy up the Marquis de Bellois' papers and the half of the document from Mr. Page, I must humour him a trifle."

"Very good," observed Meagles. "I suppose it is little the old fellow requires of you besides your company occasionally?"

"You naughty, good-for-nothing fellow, Tim!" exclaimed the beautiful huntress, bestowing upon his cheek a slight smack, rather resembling a caress, with her pretty hand. "I shall not answer such questions, sir. Good night."

"Good night, my beauty," responded Meagles, pressing his lips to the Amazon's moist mouth. "You will come and see me to-morrow; and perhaps I shall have some funny things to tell you with regard to the new lodger."

"Oh! we must amuse ourselves at his expense," exclaimed the huntress;—and having drawn on her gloves, fixed the becoming hat upon her head, and taken up her riding-whip, she quitted the house.

Not many minutes had elapsed after her departure, when the mischievous page, whom Mrs. Piggleberry denominated Master Wasp, entered the room bearing a letter which had just arrived.

We have already described this precocious youth as being slim—genteel—and good-looking: we may now add that his countenance was intellectual and pleasing—his eyes large, black, and sparkling—and his teeth excellent. But there was a little lurking devil of good-tempered mischief in the expression of those eyes; and, notwithstanding the demure aspect which he put on in the presence of his master, it was easy to perceive that he was naturally full of fun and frolic. In her heart Mrs. Piggleberry detested him: she was however too good a judge to offend an individual who might prejudice Mr. Meagles against her, and who was moreover well acquainted with the little pilferings which she practised in reference to that gentleman's larder.

"Well, you young rascal," exclaimed Meagles, in a tone which he vainly endeavoured to render severe; "what the deuce have you been doing with Mr. Brogden's wig?"

"Me, sir!" ejaculated the page, affecting the most startled amazement. "I can assure you, sir, that Mr. Brogden has got his wig on his head at this very moment."

"Yes—because you have given it back to him," replied Meagles. "Come—let us have no more of this nonsense in future, Wasp—or else Mrs. Piggleberry will give me notice to quit."

"Not she, indeed, sir!" cried the boy. "Why, you are house-rent, washing, taxes, breakfast, dinner, and supper to her—aye, and clothes to all her poor relations into the bargain. She won't get rid of you, sir, in a hurry."

"Well, well—I dare say it is so," murmured Meagles, hastily. "Come—give me that letter; and tell Mrs. Piggleberry to get me a broiled fowl for my supper."

"Yes, sir," answered Wasp;—and away he went to execute the order he had just received.

"Who the deuce can this be from?" exclaimed Meagles aloud, as he turned the letter over and over. "Black-edged paper—a beautiful female hand—a

small seal, with mourning wax —— Egad! it must be from the poor orphan, Rose Foster!"

Then, hastily breaking it open, his eyes glanced over the contents, which ran as follow:—

"The generous interest which you have shown in my unhappy lot, and the kind assistance and counsel which you have given me in my otherwise friendless condition, would indeed experience but an ungrateful return were I not to make you acquainted with the resolution to which I have come, after very mature consideration. You may perhaps think that it is improper, and even indelicate on my part, to have given way to reflections of a worldly nature so soon—so very soon after the cruel and terrible bereavement which I have experienced. But it is precisely because the sense of this bereavement is intolerable in the long and unemployed hours I pass by myself, that I have determined to seek an occupation which may to some extent relieve my mind from incessant meditation on the loss of my beloved and lamented parents. Besides, I feel that, situated as I am, it is a sin to remain idle, and that every day which is passed by me in inactivity and in brooding over my misfortunes, is the wilful abandonment of an irretrievable portion of my youth to an unavailing despair. Employment, I feel, will tutor my soul to resignation; and although I can never cease to think of my lost parents, and must often—often drop tears to their memory, yet I am well assured that constant occupation will mellow down my grief to a sentiment of placid submission to the divine will.

"Under all these circumstances, I feel convinced that you will approve of the resolution I have adopted, and the step I have taken. Before you receive this letter, I shall have entered a large and most respectable millinery establishment, the mistress of which carries the excellence of her heart and the kindness of her soul in her frank, honest, and open countenance. I shall therefore be enabled to earn my bread, without making any farther inroads upon the sum which remained from the amount paid by the Prince and after the settlement of Messrs. Hodson and Morley's claim. That sum will therefore remain to accumulate in the Bank of England, where, under your counsel, I deposited it.

"In the establishment where I shall be when you receive this note, I have entered under an assumed name. I do not wish the mention of that of *Foster* to provoke curiosity and lead to questions concerning the lamentable death of my beloved parents. I am convinced that you will approve of my resolution in this respect.

"But now I am about to write something which may appear ungrateful: I however beseech you to view it altogether in another light. Fearful that you may think the step I have taken to be premature and that the avocation I have chosen is derogatory to a young lady well and tenderly brought up,—and apprehending that, under these impressions, you may seek to wean me from my purpose, I dare not for the present inform you where that establishment which I am about to enter is situated. But when my mind has become more settled, and I have given this new mode of life a fair trial, I will then write to you again and ask you to call and see me. For I shall ever regard you as a friend whom God raised up to shield my father's memory from any blame which the result of a Coroner's Inquest would have attached to it,—as a friend, also, to counsel and assist myself. Accept, then, Mr. Meagles, my profound gratitude; and believe me when I declare that I shall ever entertain a deep sense of the obligations under which I exist towards you.

"ROSE FOSTER."

"She has acted wisely—prudently!" said Meagles to himself, when he had terminated the reading of this epistle. "The delicacy of her innocent mind has suggested to her that it would be improper for a friend of my sex to visit her in her new abode—and she is right. But God knows that I would sooner have cut my hand off than injure a hair of her sweet head! Ah! what—a tear trickling down my cheek! Well—be it so—and I am not ashamed of it! May your existence prove a happy one, sweet Rose; and perdition seize the villain who shall seek to do you harm!"

Having thus mused aloud, Tim Meagles hastily passed his hand across his eyes, and then drained the tumbler of reeking punch which stood near him: for he felt moved—affected—unmanned!

O man of the world that thou wast—rake and debauchee though thou mightest have been—yet thine heart was good: and the drops which then trickled down thy cheeks, were an atonement for many vices and many errors! Flowing like the spring from the hard and sterile rock in the desert, the tears of a man are the waters of hope gushing forth from even a rugged nature: like the vinegar upon granite, they dissolve obduracy into the softness of holy and blessed feelings!

CHAPTER LII

NEWGATE.

The clock of Saint Sepulchre's church was striking eleven in the forenoon, when Mrs. Brace, accompanied by Harriet, alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of the prison of Newgate.

They entered the dark and gloomy vestibule, where the chains of notorious malefactors were suspended to the walls—as if crime must have its relics and justice treasure up its memorials!

The turnkey on duty inquired the business of the lady and her attendant; and the milliner instantly placed a piece of paper in his hand. It was an order, signed by one of the City Aldermen, "to admit Mrs. Brace and friends to view his Majesty's prison of Newgate."

"Now, then, Soper!" exclaimed the turnkey, at the top of his voice; and a short, stout, dirty-looking individual woke up from a nap which he was enjoying as he lay stretched at length upon a form. "Two ladies to see the gaol. Come—bustle about now—and be alive, will'ee? Why, I'm blowed if you've slept off last night's ale yet!"

"Keep your observations to yourself, Mr. Pigman," growled Mr. Soper, as he with difficulty suppressed a yawn. "This way, ladies, if you'll be so kind."

And taking up a bunch of huge keys, he opened a large grated door leading into a dark passage. Mrs. Brace and Harriet followed him; and he conducted them into a low hall, paved with massive flag-stones, and the roof of which was supported by thick square pillars. At the end of this hall, a door opened to a staircase leading up into the chapel; and this was the first feature of interest which was inspected by the visitresses.

High—narrow—and dark, the chapel of Newgate is indeed well suited for the place. Its sombre aspect—the dark wood of which the pulpit, galleries, and pews are made—and the absence of all sounds from without, combine to render it a place of awful gloom. In the times of which we are writing, and indeed until within the last few years, there was a large circular enclosure in the middle, where persons doomed to death were seated to hear the "condemned sermon." Now-a-days a chair for the wretched culprit occupies that spot; and the authorities thus render the unhappy being painfully conspicuous an

shockingly prominent. Oh! our's indeed are blood-thirsty—atrocious—and sanguinary laws; and they necessarily render all their administrators, agents, and myrmidons cruel and heartless likewise.

"There, ladies," said Mr. Soper, "you see the gallery where we puts the vimen; and that's the gallery for the men. They're separated you see: cos vy—morals afore everything. In this here round pew," he continued, pointing to the enclosure which we have already noticed, "the gallows' birds sits. On them Sundays when there's a condemned sermon, the place is quite crowded with all your fine lords and ladies from the West End, and with the families of the City authorities. Lord bless ye, ma'am," he added, turning towards Mrs. Brace, "it's as good as a play to the fashionable folk; but I often thinks to myself, thinks I, '*What a precious cruel and heartless set the wealthy and the great of this country are, to be sure!*'"

The milliner made no reply: but she doubtless thought that the man was not far wrong;—otherwise she would perhaps have taken the trouble to express her dissent from his observation.

"Now we'll visit the vimen's room," said Mr. Soper; and he accordingly led the way into the wing tenanted by the female prisoners.

The moment the door of that compartment was thrown open, the ears of Mrs. Brace and Harriet were saluted by licentious songs, obscene jests, and terrible imprecations; and they drew back, shuddering from head to foot.

"Lord, this is nothing, I can assure ye, ladies," exclaimed the man: then raising his voice to the highest pitch of its gruff intonation, he vociferated, "Now, then, you vimen, hold your jaw, will'ee?—or else I'll tell the guv'ner and stop your meat at dinner-time to-day."

The females held their peace for a short interval: but it was not through respect for Mr. Soper's command, nor in dread of his menace. Their curiosity was suddenly excited by the arrival of visitors.

And now what a revolting spectacle met the eyes of Mrs. Brace and the lady's-maid! In a large apartment, along one side of which the beds were arranged like shelves, three deep, and reminding one of the berths in a ship's cabin, a number of hideous-looking women were assembled. The air was hot and fetid: the beds were all in disorder, dirty, and miserable. Some of the females were evidently in a state bordering upon intoxication, even at that early hour in the forenoon; and their flushed countenances were rendered more disgusting by the tangled, matted, or dishevelled state of their hair—their torn, loose, negligent, and filthy apparel—their bold looks—and the air of savage ferocity and hardened sin which stamped their features.

Having indulged in a good long contemplation the visitors, some of the most daring of these wretches surrounded Mrs. Brace and Harriet, demanding money; and the milliner, with a sickening sensation at the heart, hastened to distribute some small silver coins amongst them. They expressed their pleasure in characteristic terms of revolting coarseness;—and Soper conducted Mrs. Brace and the maid into an adjoining ward.

"Them's the misdemeanant vimen that you've just seen," he observed, as he closed the huge door of the first apartment. "Now you're going to visit the female felons."

Again were the ears of the visitors saluted with libidinous songs, obscene jests, and horrid oaths as they entered the second ward; and again were those voices extinguished for a few minutes by the presence of the milliner and her abigail.

The occupants of this room were not so uniformly revolting as those in the former;—and yet they were a worse class of criminals, so far as the shades of iniquity are defined. But the misdemeanants were chiefly drunken wretches who had committed savage assaults—brothel-keepers—the lowest description of prostitutes—and old charwomen and washerwomen who had been committed for illegally pawning: whereas the female felons consisted of the dashing woman of the town who had perpetrated a robbery—the servant who had stolen in her master's dwelling-house—the young creature who had murdered her illegitimate child—the well-dressed shop-lifter—the poor seamstress who had disposed of the materials given her to make up—the lady who had robbed her furnished lodgings—the starving mother who had thieved a loaf for her famishing children—the receiver of stolen goods—the female swindler—and the old bawd in whose house some iniquitous deed had been committed. For in Newgate, up to this very hour, no attempt at classification—beyond the mere division of the misdemeanants and the felons—has ever been made;—and thus the novice in crime herds with those who have grown gray in iniquity!

Is not this infamous?—is it not shocking in the extreme? And then the Legislature affects to wonder that crime should be upon the increase! How can it be otherwise? What effort is made to reform the offender?—what wholesome scheme is adopted to reclaim and restore him to society? None—none;—and nine-tenths of the wretched beings who crowd the felons' gaols, the hulks, and the penal settlements, and who ascend the accursed scaffold, are not so much the victims of their own misdeeds, as of that atrocious apathy and abominable neglect which are exhibited by those who have the power of reforming and ameliorating the condition of prison discipline. The poor and the ignorant in this wretched enslaved country are *made* poor and *kept* ignorant by the rascally and detestable oligarchy;—and when John Bull boasts of the freedom and excellence of his institutions, he is a prejudiced, bigotted, narrow-minded, and besotted fool. Oh! my heart bleeds when I think of the wrongs which the *millions* endure at the hands of the *few*; and there are times when I feel ashamed, degraded and humiliated at having been born an Englishman, and wish to God that I was a citizen of America!

For at this moment true freedom exists only in the United States;—and it is a loathsome mockery, a foul lie, and a burning shame to vaunt even the enjoyment of a shadow of liberty on behalf of the masses of England!

Again in the female felons' ward was Mrs. Brace's purse opened;—and, having dispensed some money amongst society's poor outcasts there, she followed Soper, who led the way to the quadrangle occupied by the males,—Harriet keeping close behind her mistress.

In the misdemeanants' apartment, a sad spectacle of human demoralisation and abasement met the eyes of the visitors. Old men—young men—and boys were wasting their time in gaming, singing flash songs, relating anecdotes of villany or debauchery, exchanging ribald jests, wrestling, or sparring. The ward was in the utmost disorder, and filthy to a degree. The

atmosphere was suffocating and fetid; the bedding was tossed about in all directions, and the table was strewed with pewter-pots, broken pipes, and tobacco ashes. For at the period of which we are writing, the prisoners were allowed to expend their money freely; and the turnkeys and ward-keepers reaped a rich harvest by supplying indulgences to those who had the coin wherewith to procure them.

In the felons' apartment the assemblage was as motley as that in the misdemeanants' ward. There, likewise, the mere boy who had commenced his noviciate in crime by thieving a handkerchief, was thrown into the society of the accomplished housebreaker; and the friendless orphan, who had pilfered a loaf was placed within the contaminating influence of the desperate highwayman. The miserable urchin who had filched a piece of bacon from a cheesemonger's shop-board was classed with the ferocious resurrectionist or the daring burglar;—and the young clerk who had embezzled a few shillings of his master's money and was sincerely, bitterly repentant, found himself compelled to associate with the swell-mob's-man, the coiner, the smasher, the incendiary, and the returned convict.

"Them's four of the gang which was committed the day before yesterday," whispered Soper to Mrs. Brace, as he pointed to two persons who sate together at a table, and two others who were in conversation at one of the windows.

The first pair thus indicated, consisted of Martin and Ramsey. The once luxurious, proud, and respected bankers of Aylesbury were now as woebegone as fallen men could be. Their pale countenances—downcast looks—and subdued tone, were strong indications of the awful sense which they entertained of their degraded condition and of the terrible doom which most probably awaited them;—while their unbrushed clothes—soiled linen—and neglected toilette proved how deficient were the conveniences and how slight were their inclinations to render themselves decent in that loathsome place.

From the persons of Martin and Ramsey the eyes of Mrs. Brace turned towards the other two individuals who had been pointed out to her, and who were conversing at the window. These were Briggs and the Beggarman; but scarcely had the milliner caught a glimpse of the latter, when a sudden vertigo seized upon her—and, staggering back, she would have fallen on the floor, had not the lady's-maid caught her in her arms.

"Halloa! here's a blowen a-faintin'!" cried half-a-dozen coarse voices; and several of the inmates of the room were rushing towards Mrs. Brace in the hope of being enabled to secure her purse or any trinkets which she might have about her—when the milliner, suddenly recovering her self-possession, hurried from the apartment.

Harriet was close to her heels—and Soper banged the door violently in the faces of the felons who were thus coming officiously forward with the ostensible purpose of rendering assistance.

"It was the close air of that room," murmured Mrs. Brace, leaning against the wall in the passage and drawing a long breath; while she inwardly congratulated herself on escaping the observation of the Big Beggarman during the few minutes she had remained in the felons' ward.

For it will be remembered that this individual was the Magsman's companion on that occasion when the milliner's house in Pall Mall was broken into during the night; and therefore Mrs. Brace and the Beggarman were no strangers to each other. We should likewise observe that as she was unacquainted with the fellow's real nomenclature as well as with his nick-name, she had not gleaned from the newspapers the fact that the Magsman's associate in the burglary at her dwelling was one of the gang so recently arrested and now in Newgate.

"Yes—I does say it were the stink of the place that made your missus ill," observed Mr. Soper to Harriet. "It's quite enow to breed a plague—and I wery often wonder that it don't. The City authorities wouldn't care a cuss if it did. But, come along, ma'am," he added, turning towards Mrs. Brace: "you've quite rekivered now—and I'll show you the condemned cells. It's in one of them that we've been obleeged to put the 'torious Joe Warren—better knowed as the Magsman—on account of his being sich a owdacious feller that it's quite a blessin' there's any walls strong enough at all to keep him close. This way, ma'am."

Thus speaking, the man conducted Mrs. Brace and Harriet into a corridor whence opened five cells. This was on the ground-floor—and he explained that there was the same number of cells on each of the two floors above. Mrs. Brace knew this already—as indeed she was acquainted with the situation of every ward, passage, and staircase which she had just visited; for she had a complete plan of Newgate at that very moment about her person!

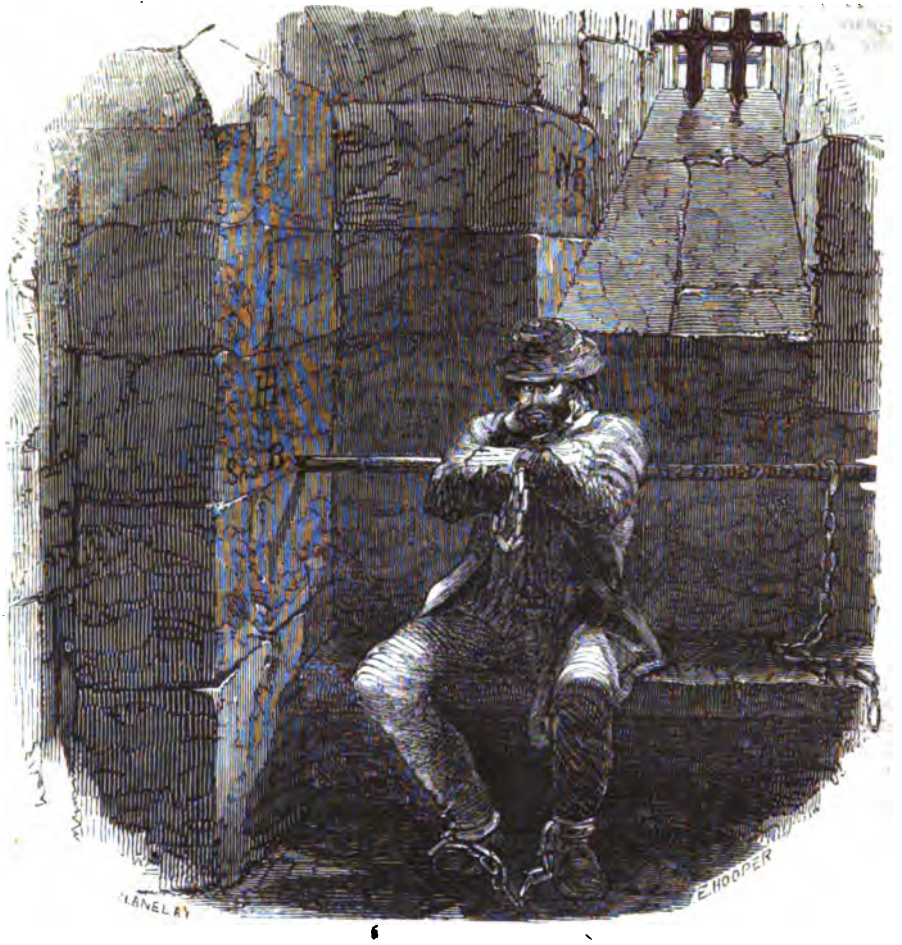
"Now, Ma'am," said Mr. Soper, in a whisper, "you shall see that terrible fellow which youv'e no doubt heerd of, and whose name is in all the newspapers."

A cold shudder passed through the frame of the milliner, striking to her very heart's core, as this announcement met her ears; for she knew that she was about to appear in the presence of her husband Not that she apprehended any recognition on his part: the Gallows' Widow had succeeded in conveying to him, through the agency of the Kinchin Grand, an intimation of the probable visit of Mrs. Brace and its object;—and that this had been done the milliner was well aware. But she trembled because she loathed the idea of acting as an accomplice, even in so covert a manner, in any scheme with which her brutal husband was connected. Unhesitatingly would this woman assist any one of her aristocratic patrons in the seduction, or even the rape, of a virgin victim: but her exquisite refinement was shocked at the thought of mixing herself up with a Magsman or a Gallows' Widow, even though the former was her own husband. Oh! how strange a thing is conscience,—sometimes concealing itself in the heart's innermost recesses, and there remaining voiceless,—at other times speaking loud and trumpet tongued in the ear!

The heavy bolts were drawn back—the key turned with a crashing sound in the lock—and the door of the cell which was last in the row, and consequently at the extreme end of the corridor, swung heavily round upon its hinges.

The eyes of Mrs. Brace instantly met those of the Magsman; and, although he gave not the slightest sign of recognition, she could nevertheless perceive that a grim smile of satisfaction swept rapidly over his countenance.

The cell in which the Magsman was confined, resembled a massive sepulchre. It was nearly



nine feet high—ten in length—and about six in breadth. The vaulted ceiling — the stone pavement—the window double grated, and high up—the tremendous thickness of the wall, as shown by the depth of the loop-hole in which that small window was set—the oaken door which a nail four inches long could not completely perforate,—and the heavy irons which the Magsman wore,—all these appearances struck the milliner, as her glance rapidly embraced them, with the impossibility of any one, however strong and daring, effecting an escape from that living tomb!

Nevertheless, she resolved to accomplish the aim of her visit; and addressing herself to the prisoner as an excuse for advancing into the cell, she said, "I hope you will repent of your errors and confess your crimes, as the only atonement you can make to that society whose laws you have outraged."

"Well, ma'am," responded the Magsman, who fully comprehended her motive, and therefore answered her in a respectful tone,—"I take your advice as it is meant—that is, in good part. But I should wish you to tell me what mercy I am likely to receive by making any confession at all."

Mrs. Brace proceeded to expatiate on the necessity of the prisoner's averting his thoughts and hopes from this world and fixing them all upon the next; and while she was thus playing the hypocrite for a particular purpose, Harriet, who had already been duly instructed by her mistress, was engaging the attention of Soper in the passage. She asked a thousand questions connected with the prison, and so ably succeeded in occupying him for several minutes, that the milliner easily found the wished-for opportunity of slipping a small parcel into the Magsman's hand —continuing her religious exhortation until he had safely secured it about his own person.

"Well, ma'am," he observed at last, "I've lis-

tened to you with the respect due to a lady of your appearance: but I really don't wish to hear any more. As for confession—that's all gammon; and if I must swing, I shall die game."

Mrs. Brace lifted her hands as if in despair of converting him, and, turning away, issued from the cell. Mr. Soper closed the massive door—locked and bolted it again—and then conducted the milliner and her attendant to the other quarters of the prison.

But thither we shall not follow them: suffice it to say that, having inspected the remainder of the gaol, the visitors took their departure, leaving Mr. Soper well contented with the recompense which he had received for his trouble

CHAPTER LIII.

THE MYSTERIES OF OLD PAINTINGS.

In the times whereof we are writing, the house which stood next to Newgate, in the street that borrows its name from the prison, was occupied by a picture-dealer. This house was about fifteen feet higher than the gaol; and a person might easily let himself down from the roof of the former to the leads of the latter.

The picture-dealer was a man considerably advanced in years: or, to speak more accurately, he was verging upon sixty-five. He was a widower—had no children—and, being excessively parsimonious, kept but a small establishment in the shape of domestics. An old woman performed the duties of housekeeper, cook, and maid-of-all-work: a slip-shod, hungry-looking boy attended in the shop when his master was otherwise engaged;—and the third floor was occupied by an artist whom the picture-dealer retained constantly in his employment for purposes which will almost immediately transpire.

Mr. Shrubsole—for that was the euphonious name of the picture-dealer—was a tall, thin man, with a pale countenance, a bald head fringed with white hair, and large eyes of that dull hue which, being a mixture of light gray and green, gave them the appearance of having been boiled. His mouth had fallen in, because he had not a single tooth left in his head; and his nose being particularly pointed, the outlines of his profile were sharp and angular. His attire was a seedy suit of black, which age and dirt had rendered rusty and brown; and he usually wore an apron dingy in hue and smeared with paint and varnish. Add a massive pair of silver spectacles, with large circular glasses, to his countenance, and huge buckles of the same metal to his shoes, and you have before your eyes a complete portraiture of Mr. Shrubsole.

The shop was narrow, but high and long. The windows were very seldom cleaned—the floor never; and the ceiling was as black as a ceiling, that once was white, well could be. The place was always involved in a semi-obscurity, even in the most glorious summer's day; but in the winter time it was particularly sombre. This, however, the old man was wont to represent as the very best light in which real judges and connoisseurs could possibly wish to view paintings; and when evening came, or a fog prevailed in the City, he would distribute half-a-dozen wretched candles, twenty to the pound, about the shop, and then vow that it was a perfect illumination.

Notwithstanding the sordid appearance of the shop itself, it contained a great number of paintings. All the different Schools, whether ancient or modern, were represented in that congress of pictures; and it seemed as if all imaginable subjects and branches of the art had exercised the right of universal suffrage to send suitable members to that assembly. Portraits, landscapes, naval and military battles, river-scenes, animals, flowers, cities, ruins, angels, devils, historical and religious designs,—in a word, every description of subject might be viewed and selected in Mr. Shrubsole's "Gallery of Art." And if the visitor were not satisfied with what he beheld on the ground-floor, he was escorted to the first and second storeys, all the rooms of which were likewise filled with pictures.

Any individual who was not somewhat initiated in the mysteries of Mr. Shrubsole's trade, would have fancied that he possessed the finest collection of paintings in all the world, and that he must be a man of enormous wealth. For Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Correggios, Titians, Guidos, Rembrandts, Vandykes, Claudes, Poussins, Murillos, Hogarths, &c., were as plentiful in Mr. Shrubsole's establishment as blackberries on any hedge in England at the proper season.

We shall presently ascertain how it was that Mr Shrubsole became possessed of such splendid pictures, all by the great masters: but before we enter more profoundly into the mysteries of his trade, we must observe that at the farther end of the shop, and in the very darkest nook, there hung in a massive frame a piece of canvass painted all over a very dark and dingy brown, unrelieved by a single shade or outline indicative of a picture.

It was mid-day; and Mr. Shrubsole was in his shop, surveying the various master-pieces with an ineffable complacency,—while the boy was getting his dinner behind a Vandyke that was leaning against the wall.

Presently a short, stout, elderly, pragmatical gentleman entered the establishment; and, tapping the ferule of his gold-headed cane sharply upon the floor, he said, "A friend of mine has placed your catalogue in my hands; and I have come to see the pictures accordingly. But mind—I'm a tolerable good judge, I flatter myself—and I shall very soon discover whether they are the originals or only copies."

"If you find any copies here, sir," responded Shrubsole, "I'll eat 'em."

"Well—you can say nothing fairer," observed the gentleman, taking the picture-dealer's answer very seriously; and, placing himself in an attentive attitude, he began to survey the large painting behind which the boy was devouring a sausage and slice of bread.

"Splendid altar-piece, that!" said Mr. Shrubsole, after a pause. "The great master's hand visible in every tint—characteristic brilliancy of style—splendour and richness of colouring, eh? Look at that Saint in the foreground—he literally seems to stand out of the canvass."

Still the elderly gentleman made no reply—but kept his looks intently fixed upon the painting, just for all the world as if he were criticising it most minutely. But Mr. Shrubsole had already seen through him as completely as if his entire form were

made of glass; and the wily old fellow knew that his customer was one of those self-sufficient, conceited, and purse-proud individuals who affect to be connoisseurs in an art of which they are utterly ignorant.

"That masterpiece," continued Shrubsole, "was painted by Vandyke for the Cathedral at Genoa. There it remained until three years ago, when a new altar was erected; and the picture was sold for a thousand guineas to a Genoese nobleman. The nobleman sent it as a present to King George III; but his Majesty not admiring Catholic subjects, gave it to my Lord Skirmmington. His lordship gave it to his mistress, Signora Borlini, the famous singer; and she, being in want of cash the other day, sold it to me. I can let it go for five hundred—and that is dirt cheap."

"It is not dear, Mr. Shrubsole, I admit," said the elderly gentleman, at last breaking silence and turning slowly round with a very knowing air. "No—it is not dear. It's a real Vandyke—you couldn't deceive *me* if it wasn't, I can tell you. It's certainly a splendid thing. The Saint, as you say, in the foreground is admirable: he seems to be absolutely walking into the background. Ah! you perceive I'm *rather* a good judge of pictures—eh?" added the elderly gentleman, with a knowing wink of the left eye.

"I was certain of *that*, sir, the very first moment you began to look at my Vandyke," said Mr. Shrubsole. "You surveyed it with the air and manner of a connoisseur."

"Well—I think I *do* know a good picture when I see one," returned the elderly gentleman, highly delighted at the compliment paid him. "Come—I don't mind saying four hundred guineas for the Vandyke—cheque at sight."

"I couldn't do it, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Shrubsole: then, in a milder tone, he added, "No—I couldn't do it, really—much as I like dealing with any gentleman who knows how to value and appreciate fine paintings—as *you* do, sir."

"Well, well—I see I must not beat you down too much," resumed the customer, still more highly flattered by this last appeal to his vanity. "Let us say four hundred and fifty—and then, perhaps, I may be induced to purchase another picture before I leave the shop."

"On those conditions we can agree," said Mr. Shrubsole.

"Good!" ejaculated the pragmatical gentleman, while the ferule of his stick again rang sharply on the floor. "Now let me examine some more of this really fine collection. Have you a good Rembrandt?"

"Behold!" said the picture-dealer, pointing to a portrait of a Delilah, which was almost a mass of black, with a vivid streak of light stretching from the upper corner on the left hand, and ceasing at the lady's nose, one side of which it perfectly irradiated, while the other was as dark as if it had never been painted at all.

"Fine—very fine—splendid effect!" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, after a long scrutiny and an equally protracted silence. "Wonderful conception—sublime creation! But I have heard—in fact I know that there *are* Rembrandts in which the light is not so vividly pourtrayed. For *my* opinion is, Mr. Shrubsole," he added, with a remarkably knowing air, "that the dark pictures are the finest specimens of the old masters. I mean, you understand," he continued pompously, "those magnificent works in which the colours are—ahem!—so deep and the shades so—so—ahem!—so solemn and imposing in their obscurity, that to the inexperienced eye the whole picture seems nothing more or less than a black mass,—whereas *we*, Mr. Shrubsole—*we*, who are connoisseurs, can soon distinguish the fine portrait like an angelic countenance peeping forth from the midst of a night intensely dark."

"Ah! my dear sir," exclaimed the picture-dealer, throwing into his hatchet-face as warm an expression of rapture as such mummy-features could possibly assume; "you do indeed enjoy an intimate acquaintance with the peculiarities of style and the sublime characteristics which distinguished the old masters. You are an enthusiast—like me! Come, then, my dear sir—come—and feast your eyes upon the most magnificent specimen of the art which the immortal Rembrandt has left behind him!"

"Is it possible that you possess such a specimen?" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, working himself up into a perfect fit of enthusiasm.

"I do indeed, sir," responded Shrubsole: and, lighting a miserable candle, he led the way to the extremity of the shop. "There, sir—there, brother connoisseur!" he ejaculated, in a tone of triumph, and pointing to the canvass which we have already described as being painted all over a very dark and dingy brown, and not having the slightest trace of any picture at all.

The elderly gentleman planted himself at what he conceived to be a proper distance in order to view the magnificent work of art; and a feeling of profound respect and veneration came over him as he fixed his eyes on the canvass. His countenance assumed a very solemn expression; and he gazed long—intently—and silently. As a matter of course he could distinguish nothing: all was a dark and obscure void;—but not for worlds would he have compromised his reputation as a connoisseur by turning round to the picture-dealer and frankly exclaiming, "May I be hanged if I can trace a single thing or discover a single outline!"

"You have placed yourself in an admirable position to see it to advantage," said Mr. Shrubsole, taking his own stand near the frame which enclosed the daub, and holding the candle high up. "There! now you catch the light upon the countenance. Does it not appear gradually to reveal itself to you, like a person emerging slowly from the mouth of a dark cavern? Now you begin to see the richness of the colouring—mark the life-like effect with which the cheeks are painted—behold the expression of those speaking eyes! Ah! now the light falls on the nose—and you catch the perfect outline of the profile! Some people—clever men, too—have declared that the picture is a trifle more sombre than it ought to be: but you and I, sir, know better. *You* at least can appreciate the beauty—the excellence—the magnificence of this inimitable painting."

"Yes—it is indeed wonderful!" observed the elderly gentleman, shaking his head solemnly, but at the same time fruitlessly straining his eyes to catch even the remotest glimpse of a single one of all the features which the picture-dealer had enumerated: and, for the life of him, he could not conceive what on earth the subject of the painting might be.

But he dared not ask a question—he dared not suffer it to appear that he was in a state of complete mental obfuscation: for if he seemed even for a single moment to be in the dark concerning that picture—as indeed he most assuredly was—his reputation as a connoisseur would be destroyed for ever. Vainly did he torture his imagination to persuade itself that he really did see something: no—the canvass was an awful void, or rather a mass of unvaried darkness save where the glimmer of the farthing candle flickered upon it;—and yet Mr. Shrubsole said it *was* a picture—and gazed upon it as if it were—and therefore a picture, thought the elderly gentleman, it certainly must be!

"Well, my dear sir—are you not delighted—are ou not enraptured?" exclaimed Mr. Shrubsole, after another long and solemn silence. "Do you not feel an enthusiasm glowing in your veins?—do you not experience a sensation as if you could fall down and worship that master-piece of the immortal Rembrandt? Ah! my dear sir, to a connoisseur like you this is indeed the richest of treats—far, far exceeding the most luxurious banquet!"

"I confess that I am lost—bewildered—confused—astounded," said the elderly gentleman—and most assuredly he was. "I mean—I am amazed by the magnificence——"

"Oh! I can comprehend your feelings, my dear sir," interrupted the picture-dealer. "Do you not long to become the owner of this treasure?"

"What is the sum?" demanded the elderly gentleman: for he felt convinced that if *he* could make nothing of the subject of the painting, his family and friends would be equally in the dark—and he knew that his reputation as a connoisseur would rise to the very zenith by the mere fact of possessing a picture of such extraordinary merit that no one could understand it!

"Alas! my dear sir," said Mr. Shrubsole, forcing himself to heave a profound sigh,—"the badness of the times—the flatness of business—the state of the Money-Market—all combine to induce me to part with my Rembrandt for a mere song. Five hundred guineas—not a farthing less—and even then it will cost me a pang to lose my Rembrandt!"

"Five hundred guineas you shall have," said the elderly gentleman, emphatically. "It would be a desecration and a sacrilege to attempt to beat you down. But of course—that is, my dear sir—I suppose," added the customer, with a slight embarrassment in his tone and manner,—"you can get a paragraph inserted in the newspapers to the effect—ahem!—that your most valuable Vandyke and your Rembrandt master-piece have been purchased—ahem!—for a large sum by—ahem!—that liberal amateur and well-known connoisseur, Sir Brinksby Bull."

"What! is it indeed the famous Sir Slinksby Pull who has thus honoured my Gallery by his presence?" cried the old picture-dealer, affecting to survey his customer with the deepest reverence mingled with admiration: although, to tell the truth, he had never in his life heard the name before, and had even now caught it so imperfectly that he made a sad mess of the euphonious nomenclature when attempting to repeat it. "Then I am glad that my two best paintings have fallen to the possession of one who will know how to value them. My dear sir," he continued, "you have acquired perfect treasures this day. The pictures shall be dusted and cleaned, and sent to your mansion in the course of the week."

"Very good, Mr. Shrubsole!" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, who was a retired grocer, and having been mayor of some town when the corporation thereof presented an address to the King had received the *honour* of Knighthood—since which occurrence he had settled, with Lady Brinksby Bull and all the little Brinksby Bulls, in a Square at the West End of London, where he gave grand parties and set himself up as a patron of the fine arts: although, as the reader may very well conceive, he was a much better judge of muscovado than of pictures.

However, Sir Brinksby wrote a check for nine hundred and fifty guineas—left his address—and strode pompously away, thinking how he should astonish all his friends and aristocratic acquaintances with his magnificent Rembrandt.

The moment the Knight's back was turned, Mr. Shrubsole rubbed his hands smartly together, and chuckled in a low mumbling tone, as old gentlemen are wont to do when they are hugely delighted: and having thus demonstrated his satisfaction, he exclaimed, "Now, Tom—where are you?"

"Here, sir," said a short, pale, thin, and dirty-looking urchin, as he emerged from behind the great picture.

"You must mind the shop for a little while," continued his master. "And remember, if any one comes in, this portrait is Admiral Drake," he added, pointing to a bluff-looking naval officer, with a small cocked hat perched on the top of a large wig.

"Why, sir—I thought he was Van Trump," exclaimed the boy.

"Van Tromp you mean!" cried Mr. Shrubsole. "Well—he has been Van Tromp for the last three weeks—and no one will buy a Dutch Admiral. So we must see whether the public can be tempted with an English one. And this portrait," continued the picture-dealer, pointing to a military commander, "has been Prince Eugene long enough. No one cares a curse about Prince Eugene. Let him be the Duke of Marlborough. Have we got a Marquis of Granby?"

"The last that Mr. Woodfall painted, sir, was sold yesterday," answered the boy.

"Well—this Marshal Turenne must be a Granby, then, in case anybody wants one. And while I think of it, Tom," added Mr. Shrubsole, "that Rubens in the window there had better be a Titian; and this picture which Mr. Woodfall painted last week, and which we baked yesterday, must be a Michael Angelo. Now, shall you remember all these instructions?"

"To be sure I shall, sir," returned the lad, with a knowing leer.

"Well—I've done a good afternoon's business—and here's a penny for you," said Mr. Shrubsole, placing the copper coin as carefully in the boy's hand as if it were a guinea, which he was fearful might drop and roll between the boards.

Having thus given the poor half-starved wretch a proof of his liberality, the picture-dealer ascended several flights of narrow, dark, and dilapidated stairs, and ultimately reached the third floor. There he entered a front room in which several pictures, resting on their easels, were distributed about. These works of art were in various stages towards comple-

tion; and their subjects were as varied and their respective style as different as those which were displayed for sale in the shop and apartments beneath. In fact, it was in this room that all Mr. Shrubsole's Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Correggios, Titians, Guidos, Rembrandts, Vandykes, Claudes, Poussins, Murillos, and Hogarths were composed and manufactured; and from that sordid-looking studio flowed the stream of "master-pieces" that supplied the picture galleries of the aristocratic and wealthy class throughout England.

And who was the artist that combined in his own person a glimmering reflection of the talents of all those great masters? The reader may perhaps suspect that the paintings were the veriest daube in the universe: but such indeed they were not. On the contrary, they evinced immense skill, a profound acquaintance with the style of those originals of which they were imitations, and no small experience in producing fine effects. In a word, genius was stamped upon each and all; and if that genius were far inferior to the assemblage of models which it kept in view, it was nevertheless of no common order.

In the workshop, or studio, which we have just seen Mr. Shrubsole enter, a young man was busily employed with his palette and brushes. He was tall —thin—but symmetrical in proportions, and of a genteel appearance. His countenance was pale, without being absolutely sickly: and his large dark eyes flashed with the fire of genius. Coal black hair, silky and glossy as that of a woman, curled naturally above the high, noble, and intellectual forehead over which it was parted; and his whiskers, of the same jetty dye, met beneath his chin, the oval countenance thus being framed in ebony. His delicately pencilled brows were finely arched: he had the short and slightly curved upper lip which denoted a haughty disposition;—and his teeth were remarkably white and even. His toilette was plain, and even homely: but his linen was perfectly clean, his boots well blacked, and his clothes carefully brushed. When at work, he wore an apron, which reached half-way up his chest; and altogether his appearance was so neat and interesting that it not only contrasted strongly with the miserable aspect of the apartment, but was also widely different from the slovenliness and neglect which usually characterise men of that profession.

This young artist, whose age was certainly not more than five-and-twenty, was named George Woodfall; and he it was who, for a remuneration ridiculously moderate, touched up and altered the old pictures which his employer bought at sales and elsewhere, and likewise painted new ones. In fact, he was the author of the Michael Angelos, Rembrandts, and other "master-pieces" which Mr. Shrubsole disposed of as originals, and for which he obtained large sums.

"Well, my dear George," said the picture-dealer, as he entered the room: "hard at work—eh? Nothing like it—nothing like it! I have just sold the Vandyke—the Saints, you know? Let me see: that painting I bought at a sale in Wardour Street—and then you touched it up."

"Touched it up!" exclaimed the young man, indignantly: "I made it what it is—I converted it from a vile daub into something which, at all events, you have managed to pass off as a Vandyke. But how much did you obtain for it?" he asked, in a milder tone

"A mere trifle—forty guineas," answered Shrubsole, telling this great falsehood without a blush and without the quivering of a muscle of his countenance. "I shall add half-a-guinea to your wages on Saturday night: I can't do more, as times go."

"Wages!—do you look upon me as a servant?" cried Woodfall, grinding his teeth. "Call it pittance —stipend—income—salary—anything you choose: but not wages!"

"Well — well — I didn't mean to offend you, George," said the picture-dealer, trembling at the young man's excitement. "But I have something else to inform you this afternoon. I've sold a Rembrandt."

"Which?" demanded Woodfall.

"Whichever you like to make it," responded Mr Shrubsole, with a chuckling laugh.

"Ah! I see—you have been playing off the black canvass on the imagination of some simpleton," observed the young man. "Well — I can scarcely blame you. The world are so vain and conceited that they deserve to be taken in. Sooner than confess themselves ignorant, they will affect to see a picture where no picture exists. Oh! the contemptible fools—the drivelling idiots!"

"Come—don't excite yourself on that account, my dear young friend," said Mr. Shrubsole, laying his long, lean, withered hand upon the shoulder of the tall, graceful young man.

"Not I indeed," exclaimed Woodfall, with a contemptuous curl of the lip: "these miserable *ignorami* are not worth a sneer. But how much did you get from your customer by persuading him into the belief that a dark canvass was a splendid painting?"

"A trifle—a mere trifle—thirty guineas," responded Shrubsole, telling lie the second. "But I shall add *another* half-guinea to your wa—— salary," he cried, hastily correcting himself, "next Saturday night. Come—you must paint in a female Saint or some such thing on the dark canvass: a quarter of an hour in the oven will then give it a few cracks all over, and bestow an *ancient appearance* on it;—and perhaps we shall use a little meguelp or turpentine to subdue the freshness of the colouring, and make it look a *leetle* black and dirty."

"I will go down and fetch up the canvass at once," said Woodfall.

"Eh! that's a dear good young man. Lose no time about it. I'll just look at the pictures you've been working on to-day, till you come up again."

And while Mr. Shrubsole turned towards the partially finished paintings on their easels, the talented artist descended into the shop.

"Tom," he said, immediately accosting the boy, into whose hand he slipped a shilling; "how much did your master receive for that Vandyke?"

"Four hundred and fifty guineas, sir," was the reply.

"And for the pretended Rembrandt?" was Woodfall's next query.

"Five hundred guineas, sir," answered the lad.

"Thank you, Tom: you are a good boy—a very good boy," observed the artist, in a low and hurried tone—for he was afraid of being overheard by the picture-dealer. "And who was the purchaser?"

"Sir Brinksby Bull," returned Tom.

George Woodfall drew forth his pocket-book—made a few hasty memoranda—and then proceeded to carry the daubed canvass up to his workshop on the third floor.

By nine o'clock in the evening the outlines of a avenly face had been sketched on that canvass; r the young artist worked unweariedly until the d female domestic called him to supper. This eal was served in the kitchen; and on the present casion it was somewhat more bounteous in quany and inviting in quality than usual—for the pice-dealer was slightly moved to liberality by the od business he had done that day.

After supper Mr. Shrubsole despatched the serant to the nearest tavern for two bottles of wine; d the party—consisting of the picture-dealer himlf, the artist, the domestic, and the boy — sate inking and conversing until the booming bell of . Sepulchre's Church proclaimed the hour of even.

"Now, then—to-bed!" exclaimed Mr. Shrubsole, ing from his seat with a partial degree of difficulty, d staggering somewhat as he extended his hand to asp the chamber-candle.

At this moment there was a loud and imperious uble-knock at the street door;—and the domestic stened to respond to the summons. Those who mained behind in the kitchen heard her ascend the airs—open the door—answer a few questions put her by several voices both male and female—and en admit the visitors into the passage, the door imediately afterwards closing behind them. All this d Mr. Shrubsole, George Woodfall, and the boy om hear as plainly as possible in the kitchen below: t suddenly a dead silence succeeded — and not other sound reached them after the echoes raised the shutting of the street-door had died away.

"This is very ex—tri—traordinary," murmured r. Shrubsole, glancing with a kind of vacant uneasiss at the artist. "I could swear—hic—that—I—I ard people come — hic — into the — hic — hic — ouse."

"I will go and see," said Woodfall;—and, hastening out of the kitchen, he ascended the stairs.

It struck both the picture-dealer and Tom that ey heard something like a short scuffle in the assage over-head: but if it were so, the conflict ased almost instantaneously and was unmarked by ingle cry for assistance. A solemn silence again preiled;—and uselessly did Shrubsole hold his breath the hope of catching the sounds of George Woodll's returning footsteps. It appeared as if both the rvant and the artist had been spirited away by some pernatural agency: for not a sound was heard—, not even the rustling of a dress!

"Tom—Tom—the devil's in the house," whispered e picture-dealer, pretty well sobered by the terror ising from the mysterious occurrences of the last w minutes.

"Lord bless ye, sir!" returned the boy: "I'll be und it's only a bit of fun of some kind or another. m not afraid."

And away he rushed up the staircase, purposely aking his hob-nailed shoes clatter as heavily as he uld upon the steps. The picture-dealer listened th suspended breath: he could tell when the boy ached the passage—and there he suddenly stopped. t the same instant a sharp noise, like that of a man's nd slapping a face or striking with the flat of the lm against a wall, fell on Shrubsole's ear. A short pid scuffle followed;—and then all was still roughout the house, and silent as the grave.

The old man sank down upon a chair, gasping for eath; while his countenance, as the flickering gleams of a wretched candle played upon it, was hideous with the workings of excessive terror. His limbs trembled convulsively—his lips, white and bloodless, quivered like aspens—and his eyes glared wildly in the direction of the door leading to the dark staircase, as if he every moment expected that some grisly spectre would come forth from the obscurity.

Suddenly he started up: his fears goaded him to desperation;—and desperation gave him courage Thieves might be plundering his house, while he was sitting helplessly and pusillanimously in the kitchen.

Taking up the light, he ascended the stairs, holding the candle high above his head so as to throw its rays forward. But scarcely had he mounted half-a-dozen steps, when something whizzed through the air—apparently coming from the passage: and in a moment the candle was struck from the old man's hand.

Uttering a loud cry, he fell back senseless;—and when consciousness slowly returned, he found himself seated by the kitchen fire, on which more coals had evidently been heaped. At the same instant he became aware that he was fastened by a strong cord, which bound him hand and foot, to the arm-chair wherein he had been so considerately placed.

A candle—the very one which had been dashed from his grasp by the well-aimed missile—was burning on the table;—and around the kitchen did Mr. Shrubsole now glance hastily. His fears—if his selfishness allowed him to entertain any apart from those which concerned his property and his gold—were immediately relieved in respect to the artist, the old female dependant, and the boy Tom;—for these three individuals were his companions—but each bound, like himself, to a chair.

"What—how—when——" stammered the bewildered picture-dealer, anxious to ask questions but unable to find words to frame them.

"Silence!" exclaimed a sharp imperious female voice close behind Mr. Shrubsole's chair; and at the same instant he felt something cold touch the back of his neck.

Throwing his body forward as far as the cords would permit, he hastily turned his head and beheld a woman, with a black crape mask over her countenance and a pair of horse-pistols in her hands, evidently mounting guard upon the four prisoners.

"Hold your tongue—and no harm shall happen to you, sir," continued the woman. "No robbery is intended—and it will be your fault if violence or bloodshed should ensue. Raise but your voice one note higher than you have already spoken, and I will send a bullet through your head without an instant's hesitation."

And again she placed the cold muzzle of a pistol behind his ear: for this woman appeared to play with the murderous weapons as if they had been familiar toys from her very birth.

"In fact, the shortest plan and the best," she continued, "is not to speak at all. This I have recommended to your three fellow-prisoners; and they are wisely following my counsel."

"Think not, woman," observed the young artist, irritated by this observation, "that my silence is occasioned by fear of you or your pistols. But, bound as I am to the chair, you may well suppose that I have little inclination to open my lips in discourse."

"I will give you credit, sir, for any motive you

please, so long as you do not speak too loud," said the woman.

George Woodfall made no answer: but a hollow moan escaped the picture-dealer; while the female servant heaved a profound sigh. As for the boy Tom—he dosed off into a comfortable nap;—and a deep silence now reigned in the kitchen and throughout the house.

CHAPTER LIV.

JOE WARREN IN NEWGATE.

We must now return to the Magsman, whom we left at the moment when Mrs. Brace, with a studied hypocrisy assumed in order to blind Mr. Soper, raised her hands and eyes in apparent despair at the prisoner's hardened nature.

The heavy door clanged again upon the solitary occupant of that cell: he heard the key turn in the lock and the bolts shoot into their sockets;—and then he waited until the sounds of the retreating footsteps died away in the passage.

But so soon as all was still—save the low rumbling of the vehicles in the adjacent street—the Magsman lost no more time ere he examined the parcel which his wife had so dexterously slipped into his hand. The contents thereof were as follow:—

1. A map, or plan, of Newgate.
2. A small file.
3. Four stout and well-pointed nails.
4. A cord of twisted silk, not much thicker than common string, but strong enough to sustain an immense weight.
5. Three pieces of iron, each about four inches in length and of the thickness of the thumb, and which were made to screw together so as to form a small but effective crowbar, or "jemmy."
6. A little piece of putty, mixed with black lead.

Such were the contents of the parcel; and, although miscellaneous and numerous, they were easily packed into a very limited compass. A grim smile of satisfaction passed over the Magsman's countenance as he examined those articles one after the other; and having secured the file, the nails, the ball of silken cord, the disjointed "jemmy," and the scrap of paper containing the morsel of putty, about his person, he proceeded to study and scrutinize the plan of Newgate.

We have already stated that he was confined in that condemned cell which stood last in the row of five on the ground-floor; and the map now before him showed that his cell was, as he had already suspected it to be, in the north-eastern angle of the gaol. The loop-hole looked upon Newgate Street; and the people passing along that thoroughfare, under the frowning wall, were within a yard of him. The eastern side of his dungeon joined Mr. Shrubsole's house.

We have also informed the reader that there were five condemned cells overhead, on the first floor; and another row of cells higher still, on the second floor: consequently there were two rooms between the ceiling of the Magsman's dungeon and the roof of the prison.

Having thus examined those details of the plan which especially concerned himself, the Magsman thrust the map into his pocket, and drew forth the file. This little instrument, scarcely larger than the blade of a pen-knife, was as admirably tempered as a watch-spring. The Magsman bent it into a complete circle, and it flew back into unimpaired straightness; and he knew thereby that a Sheffield workshop, and no imitative London manufactory, had produced the file.

Seating himself on the pavement-floor, and having spread his handkerchief to catch the glistening particles of metal, the Magsman began to file one of the huge links of his massive chains. To one less courageous, persevering, and experienced than himself, the task now undertaken would have appeared about as hopeful as an attempt to pull down a house with a nail: but Joe Warren knew well what he had to achieve, and the amount of work which the trusty file, with its sharp and irresistible teeth, could accomplish.

Presently, the clock of St. Sepulchre struck one. It was dinner time—and the Magsman hastened to conceal the file and gather up his handkerchief. Then, into the space which the file had opened in the half-severed link, he put some of the putty, which, being black and shining, corresponded so well with the iron that the most keen and piercing eyes could not have detected the process which was in operation.

Scarcely was this little arrangement made, when heavy footsteps were heard in the echoing passage—the bolts were drawn—the door was opened—and the man Soper appeared with a covered dish in one hand and a pot of beer in the other.

"Your friends take good care of you, old feller," said the gaol functionary, as he removed the cover from the dish, more out of curiosity than politeness "Roast fowl, sassages, mashed taturs, and new bread—my eyes! don't you come it strong? A quart of strong beer, too: well, you ain't very much to be pitied, I don't think. Your grub is a deuced sight better than gaol allowance."

"Will you sit down and have some dinner with me?" asked the Magsman.

"Can't stop—or else I would," responded Soper. "But I don't mind a drop of beer;"—and, with these words, he took a tolerable long draught. "I say, old feller," he observed, setting down the pot and wiping his mouth with his coat-sleeve, "your trial comes on the day arter to-morrow. I've just seed the calendar."

"Well—it can't be helped," said the Magsman. "I've made my mind up to the worst."

"The wery best thing you can do," responded Mr. Soper, intending his remark to be of a consolatory nature. "What a precious fine woman that was which I showed round the gaol just now! Such eyes—and such teeth—and such a bust! She give me half-a-guinea for my trouble. But I'm perwenting you from eating your dinner—and I'm a-vastin my own time. So I'll be off now and come back in twenty minutes or so for the things."

Soper accordingly retired—locking and bolting the door carefully after him. For, with all his apparent familiarity and good feeling towards the Magsman and with all the characteristic avarice of an official he was incorruptible in this capacity; and no money which Joe Warren or his friends had it in their power to offer, would have induced him to wink or connive at an escape. Indeed, during the short time he had remained in the cell, his eyes had travelled rapidly, but keenly and searchingly, over every link

in the Magsman's chains; and had he caught the faintest glimpse of anything calculated to excite his suspicions, he would have immediately summoned an assistant who had accompanied him as far as the entrance of the passage, and the most rigid investigation would have been the result.

However, his penetration and shrewdness were baffled for once; and the Magsman chuckled inwardly as he sate down to the enjoyment of the roast fowl, the sausages, the mashed potatoes, and the porter, which an eating-house in the Old Bailey had supplied. We should however observe that the fowl and sausages had been previously cut up into pieces, the potatoes turned over with a spoon, and even the very beer poured from one pot into another, by the busy hands of Mr. Soper, to assure himself that no file nor watch-spring was secreted amongst the articles intended for the prisoner's dinner.

The Magsman understood the meaning of all this, and knew that a strict watch was kept upon him: but he was very far from despairing of his escape; and as he devoured his food with a ravenous appetite, he said to himself, "To-morrow I shall not dine in Newgate."

At the expiration of about twenty minutes, Soper returned to take away the dishes and pewter-pot, all of which Joe Warren had cleared; and when the door again closed upon him and he was once more alone, he knew that he had four hours and a half to work in before he should experience another interruption.

And with such hearty good will did the Magsman ply the irresistible file, that by the time St. Sepulchre's Church struck six in the evening, two thirds of the labour was accomplished in respect to the massive chains with which he was laden. The booming of the bell, as it proclaimed that hour, was the signal for him to desist again; and, having concealed the file and filled up the severed portion of the links with the black putty, he lay down on the iron bedstead and affected to have been sleeping when Mr. Soper re-appeared with his supper and a candle.

A few remarks were interchanged; and the Magsman was left to the enjoyment of his meal. In twenty minutes Soper returned to fetch the plate and pewter-pot; and Warren had then two hours wherein to continue his operations until the official should make his last round for the night.

During these two hours the Magsman filed almost completely through each of the four links which it was necessary to sever in order to enable himself to throw off his chains at the proper time; and he had scarcely filled up the places with the remains of his blackened putty, when Soper entered the cell. The man examined the shackles all over, and appeared quite satisfied that they had not been tampered with. He then wished the Magsman good night, and took his departure, double-locking the door, and securely fastening all the bolts.

The candle, having been sent in from the coffee-house which supplied the Magsman's meals, was not taken away from him: for, in the times of which we are writing, untried prisoners were permitted the use of lights until a late hour,—and Mr. Soper saw by the length of the candle that it would not burn much beyond eleven o'clock.

The Magsman resolved to wait until the church of St. Sepulchre should have struck nine, ere he commenced the grand operations which he hoped would result in his escape. There was the possibility, though certainly not the probability, that Soper might take it into his head to pay him another visit that evening: but he felt confident that if the official came at all, it would be at nine o'clock.

Slowly—slowly passed that hour, during which the Magsman weighed, with some anxiety, all the chances for and against his escape. At one moment he dreaded lest Soper suspected his intentions: at another he feared that his friends might fail in accomplishing *their* portion of the work in the picture-dealer's house. Then his blood ran cold in his veins as the idea struck him that the implements which he possessed and the short time that he could command were totally inadequate for the immensity of the task that must be accomplished: and even when he reasoned himself into confidence on these heads, another source of alarm presented itself. What if some prisoner had been placed, during the day, in the cell overhead—or in the cell higher up still?

"No—it isn't likely," thought the Magsman to himself. "No one has been condemned to death *yet* during this session: and if there was, the ground-floor cells would be filled first."

Again did the voice of his own fears suggest, in whispering tones, that desperate characters like himself, might have been incarcerated during the last few hours in the cells above.

"Well—and if so," was his self-solacing argument, "any fellow that I might fall against in such a position would be only too glad to seize the opportunity of escaping along with me."

Scarcely had he arrived at this conclusion, when the clock struck nine;—and no intrusive step approached the door of his cell.

He waited ten minutes longer;—and still all was quiet, save the rumbling of the carts and hackney-coaches in Newgate Street.

"Now for it!" exclaimed the Magsman to himself; and, with a comparatively slight effort, he broke off his chains.

A weight seemed to be lifted from his heart in a moment: it bounded with an elasticity which scattered all remaining doubts and fears to the winds. He felt as if half of his freedom were already accomplished, and that it only depended on himself to consummate the rest. Had he imbibed a tumbler full of brandy, the effects could not have been more exhilarating.

Without losing a moment unnecessarily, Joe Warren screwed the three pieces of the jemmy together. He then drew the iron bedstead as noiselessly as possible into the middle of the cell, and lifted it up on one end. By means of the chair he mounted on the head-board, which was uppermost; and now, through the deep loop-hole of his dungeon, he could see the lights in the houses on the opposite side of Newgate Street. Yes—and he beheld the people passing in both directions; and the forms of the drivers seated outside their vehicles were borne rapidly by. Life and bustle were without; solitude and death within;—and he must escape—oh! he must escape—from the gloom and the danger of the latter, to join once more the companionship and the pleasures of the former!

We have already stated that the cell had a vaulted roof: and consequently the centre thereof was the thinnest part. Mounted on the upraised bedstead, the Magsman attacked with his crow-bar the soli-

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masonry over-head—loosening the mortar as well as he was able round the key-stone of the arched ceiling. The task was by no means easy: for the mortar had hardened into the callosity of the granite-blocks which it held together—the position in which Warren was forced to labour was an awkward one—and the dust of the disturbed lime fell into his eyes.

Nevertheless he toiled courageously on in spite of these disadvantages; and in half-an-hour a large stone next to the central one was dislodged. The first breach having been made, materially facilitated the ensuing operations: the key-stone itself was soon removed—and by ten o'clock a considerable excavation was formed in the middle of the ceiling, so that the Magsman could feel with his hand the lower side of a flagstone in the pavement of the cell overhead.

To raise this flag was no easy matter. It was necessary to clear away all the masonry adhering to those parts where it joined the circumjacent stones, from which it had to be separated by the jemmy. But at length this labour was accomplished; and the Magsman, to his infinite joy, found the flag yield to his vigorous upward pressure.

He moved it away from the mouth of the aperture which he had thus formed; and, without any difficulty, the adventurous Magsman passed through that opening into the cell immediately above his own. He dared not take the candle with him—for if any official of the prison should happen to be passing along Newgate Street and observe a light streaming from the loop-hole of a room which he knew to be occupied at the time, a suspicion that something wrong was going on would instantly be followed by a search—the result of which must, as a matter of course, prove fatal to the Magsman's enterprise.

In the dark, therefore, did he hastily grope about the cell into which he had thus worked his way:—and, to his joy, he discovered that it contained an iron bedstead similar to the one which had served him as a scaffolding below. Tilting it up lengthways,

and mounting on the head-board, as in the former instance, the Magsman renewed his operations by a determined attack on the ceiling of this cell on the first floor.

If his progress were not so rapid as hitherto, and if the necessity of working in the dark materially impeded his operations, nevertheless he found some recompense in the fact that the roof he was now assailing was not near so thick as the one through which he had already passed. Nevertheless, the toil was arduous in the extreme: the dust, getting into his throat, created a burning thirst; and he was several times forced to descend and drink from the large pitcher of water in his own cell. But every piece of mortar which he broke away and every stone which he removed, appeared in his eyes to be another and another obstacle overcome; and, so far from despairing, his hopes acquired strength as time progressed.

Midnight sounded from St. Sepulchre's just as the Magsman succeeded in raising a large flag which covered the excavation he had formed in the vaulted roof of this dungeon on the first floor; and in a few minutes he passed up into the cell overhead. Around the walls, in the total darkness, did he sweep his hands: but, alas! this time he was disappointed—for the place was entirely empty—and there was no iron bedstead to form a scaffolding.

This contingency had however been provided for, as the reader will soon find.

Descending into the room beneath, the Magsman thrust the blanket and cover-lid (*alias* horse-cloth) belonging to the bed, up into the top cell; and mounting thither once more, he resumed his operations with fresh energy, though working in utter darkness.

Using the trusty crow-bar as a hammer, he drove two of the four nails which had been sent him, into one of the walls, at a distance of five feet from the floor, and about a foot apart from each other. The remaining two he drove into the opposite wall, preserving as nearly as he could guess the same relative position. He then unwound his ball of silken cord, and fastened it from nail to nail, in such a manner that two parallel lines, with an interval of twelve inches, extended from wall to wall; and as the length of the string allowed these lines to be doubled, they were competent to bear a very considerable weight.

The Magsman now folded the blanket and horse-cloth into a sort of square cushion, which he placed upon the lines; and, having without much difficulty seated himself thereon, he was fairly balanced at a height of five feet from the floor, and at a convenient distance from the ceiling which he now attacked with his crow-bar.

One o'clock struck before the intrepid Joe Warren succeeded in moving the first stone. Well nigh exhausted with the extraordinary exertions he had already made—so parched with thirst that his tongue seemed like a piece of charcoal—and finding his tight-rope scaffold, ingenious though the contrivance might be, most inconvenient for his operations, the nearer he drew to the threshold of liberty, the greater became the difficulties which he had to encounter.

But still he did his best; and he worked cheerily, cheerily on;—nor would he waste time by descending into the cell on the ground-floor to slake his burning thirst with the water that was there.

Every now and then he paused for a few moments to listen—and when some suspicious noise met his ears, the Magsman grasped his crow-bar all the more tightly, and ground his teeth together,—for he was animated with the ferocious resolve to murder the first person who might appear to molest him. But on each occasion his apprehensions proved groundless—and he resumed his toils with a resuscitated energy.

All on a sudden the silken cords snapped in twain—and Joe Warren fell heavily upon the stone pavement.

He was sorely bruised; and for an instant he imagined that one of his legs was broken;—but rising slowly and painfully, he shook himself like a lion that has just escaped from the pursuit of hunters—and a savage growl burst from his breast.

What was he to do? To mend the lines so as to enable them to bear his weight again, was impossible. A thought struck him!—he would descend to the cell beneath and pull the iron bedstead to pieces in order to form a scaffold for the continuation of his labours.

Rolling up the blanket and horse-cloth, and fastening them together so as to constitute a rope, he tied one end round the huge flag-stone which he had displaced from the floor of the uppermost cell, and passed the rope through the hole into the dungeon beneath: because when once the iron bedstead should have been broken up, he would lose that means of ascent into the top dungeon again.

Descending into the cell on the first storey, he lowered the bedstead to its proper horizontal position, and tried the screws which held the various pieces together. But he was enveloped in darkness—the candle in his own cell had been extinguished for the last two hours—and he could not possibly pursue his present operations in such dense obscurity. Gnashing his teeth with rage, and giving vent to horrible imprecations in an under tone, the Magsman again and again tried the screws with his crow-bar: but they were so completely rusted into their sockets, that half-an-hour was thus passed without producing the slightest effect upon any one of them.

What was he to do? Again he asked himself this question; and, sitting down exhausted on the bed which he had fruitlessly endeavoured to break up, he wiped the perspiration and the dust from his throbbing brows.

The Magsman was perfectly ferocious: he chafed like a starved lion in a cage—he would have ruthlessly murdered any turnkey or prison official who might have appeared at that moment.

Yet something must be done! Time was passing: the hour was already gone by at which his friends expected that he would have succeeded in working his way through the masonry of the top cell so that only a thin sheet of lead should lie between him and liberty!

What if he were to tear the sacking of the straw-mattress into slips, and fasten them to the four nails in the place of the broken cord of silk? Yes—this was the only course which he could now adopt. Had there been a sacking, lashed with ropes in the usual way, to the bed, all this trouble and anxiety were spared him: but, alas! the foundation of that bedstead was a thin sheet of iron, supported by cross bars of the same metal, and on which the mattress lay.

No time was to be lost! With his powerful hands he tore open that mattress—turned out the straw—and rent the coarse stuff into several long slips. These he twisted up and fastened together; and, re-

cending once more to the top cell, he fixed his new tight-rope apparatus. It answered the purpose even far better than he had expected;—and, with reviving spirits, to work the Magsman went again.

The clock struck two as he thus resumed his toils; and he muttered to himself, "If nothing more happens to hinder me, I shall be safe away before that bell speaks again."

Tremendous were the exertions which the Magsman now made to accomplish his purpose: the masonry fell about him in large pieces—the dust involved him in a dense and palpable cloud, floating amidst the darkness—and the perspiration streamed down his face as if water had been poured over his head.

At length, immediately after the fall of a stone which had resisted his efforts for several minutes, his crow-bar struck against the lead which covered the flat roof of the gaol!

Then he paused, and listened with the deepest suspense.

From this cruel and almost agonising uncertainty he was speedily released: for three low but perfectly audible knocks upon the lead, convinced him that his friends were *there!*

Again he renewed his toils;—and every moment the hollow in the ceiling grew larger and larger.

Presently the lead was lifted from over the excavation—the fresh breeze blew upon his burning features—and as he looked up, he saw a countenance bending down over the hole thus formed.

"All right, Mr. Warren—there's nothing to apprehend!" were the reassuring words that met his ears, and which were uttered in the well-known voice of the Kinchin-Grand.

A few minutes' more labour sufficed to widen the aperture sufficiently to enable the strong arms of the Kinchin-Grand and two powerful men who were also with him, to drag Joe Warren up through the hole;—and he now stood upon the leads of Newgate!

A rope, which had been fastened to the chimney of Mr. Shrubsole's house, enabled the escaped felon and his three friends to gain the roof of that dwelling, into which they entered by means of a garret window.

"Now you can refresh yourself with a drop of somethink short," said the Kinchin-Grand.

The Magsman instinctively thrust out his hand in the dark, and grasped the case-bottle which his faithful and considerate friend thus tendered him. Long and deep was Joe Warren's draught; and never, never in all his life had the ardent alcohol seemed so welcome, so good, and so invigorating.

"You have this night done a thing that'll immortalise you," said the Kinchin-Grand, inspired with a sentiment of profound admiration for the daring feat which the Magsman had so triumphantly achieved and which had thus enabled him to escape from the strongest prison in all England.

"Well, I don't think it was a bad night's work, young fellow," returned the Magsman. "But who are your two friends, that I may thank them for the service they have done in helping you in this matter?—for it was too dark on the leads to catch a glimpse of their features—and here it's darker still."

"I suppose that the names of Dick the Tramper and Miles the Buzgloak ain't unbeknown to you, Mr. Warren?" said the Kinchin-Grand, with a chuckling laugh.

"I should rather think not!" exclaimed the Magsman, evidently delighted to be in such good company "Tip us your mawley, Dick my boy—now, Miles, give us your hand—and thank you both kindly for this night's assistance."

"It was easy work so far as we was concerned, after all," observed the Tramper, who spoke in a thick, husky tone, which was natural to him.

"And had it been ten times as difficult, we'd have done it for you, old feller," added Miles the Buzgloak.

"Lord bless ye! what a lark it was," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, having drained the flask which he had passed round. "Fust, when we double-knocked at the door, crack went a pitch-plaster over the mouth of the old woman as opened it—and she was pinioned in a jiffey. Then we stayed as still as death—and up comed a tall genelman, whom we served just the same. Then comed the boy—and smack goes the Burgundy plaster again. Last of all old Shrubsole makes his appearance ——"

"Well, we musn't stay chattering here," interrupted the Magsman, somewhat impatiently "Where's Lizzy Marks?"

"Keeping guard on the people of the house down in the kitchen," replied the precocious captain of the Kinchin-Prigs. "We carried 'em all down there, and took off the pitch-plasters from the three as had 'em dabbed on their faces; and your missus is a-keepin' them quiet with loaded pistols. But come along down stairs—and we'll call her up."

The villains accordingly descended the several flights leading to the passage communicating with the front door; and the Kinchin-Grand hurried down into the lower regions to communicate to the Gallows' Widow the welcome intelligence of her flash man's safety. But she had already heard the sounds of the heavy footsteps on the stairs; and rushing from the kitchen, she hastily gave the pistols to the Kinchin-Grand whom she met on her way, and a moment afterwards was hugging the Magsman with the most unfeigned sincerity.

When this transport of feeling was over—a feeling which even that criminal and degraded woman could experience as well as the Duchess clothed in silks and satins,—the Gallows' Widow recovered all her wonted calmness and self-possession.

"You must go out alone first—we'll follow in an hour," she said. "Yes—you must have a full hour," she continued, in a low and rapid whisper, "before we leave this house or allow the people in it a chance of freeing themselves from the cords that bind them. Here—I have provided you a large slouched hat—a cloak—and a thick shawl-handkerchief to tie round your neck."

And as she thus spoke, the woman took the various articles enumerated from a bag which in the meantime had been lying on the floor in the passage.

The Magsman speedily put on the disguise so considerately provided; then having taken leave of Dick the Tramper and Miles the Buzgloak, and having whispered two or three words in the ears of the Gallows' Widow, he issued from the house.

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CHAPTER LV.

THE MILLINER AND THE PRINCE.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of the day which followed the memorable night of Joe Warren's escape from Newgate; and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her comfortable parlour, when Harriet entered to announce *Mr. Harley*.

The Prince of Wales advanced into the room, the door of which was immediately closed behind him; and the milliner rose to welcome his Royal Highness with her sweetest smiles.

"My dear friend," he said, kissing her buxom cheeks—for she was looking most invitingly handsome,—"you must really have fancied that I had forgotten you. I have not seen you since that unfortunate Sunday evening—nearly three weeks ago—when we both of us experienced so cruel a shock——"

"And to speak candidly," interrupted Mrs. Brace, a blush mantling upon her countenance, "I was fearful that you were too much disgusted on that occasion ever to cross my threshold again."

"What! have you no better opinion of my friendship?" exclaimed the Prince, passing his arm round the milliner's waist and drawing her towards him: then, having again kissed her, he made her resume her seat; and placing himself near her, he observed, "It was an unfortunate affair, for which you were in no way to blame. Will you not believe me when I assure you it was very far from being on that account that I have not called for a fortnight and upwards? The truth is, I am worried to death with this marriage-scheme which my august father and his Ministers have got up for me, and which I dare say you have seen announced in the papers. Besides, my creditors are pressing me on all sides,—they dun—threaten me with exposure—leave insolent messages at Carlton House—write the most insulting letters to my private secretary——"

"Ah! my dear Prince, how I wish that I was wealthy enough to assist you!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

"I know you possess the most generous heart, Fanny—and therefore you can feel for me," said his Royal Highness. "But as I was telling you, these sources of vexation have made me ill—and I have scarcely been out of doors since I saw you last. This explanation will convince you that no unfriendly motive kept me away. I have often thought of you—especially when I read in the paper that the miserable man Joseph Warren was in custody."

"Ah! then you recognised the identity of that prisoner—with—my——"

And the handsome milliner stopped, blushed deeply, and held down her head.

"Why should you make allusions that distress you, Fanny?" demanded the Prince. "Yes—I knew immediately that the Joseph Warren who was thus arrested, must be the same individual who—— But no matter: and I suppose that you are aware of the marvellous escape which he achieved last night?"

"I am not only aware of it," responded the milliner: "but I was forced—yes—absolutely forced to assist him in the enterprise," she added, in a low and mournful tone.

"You!" ejaculated the Prince, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes, indeed," she immediately replied. "You of course understand that I am completely in his power—and when a woman who is connected with him called upon me and represented how my services could be rendered available, I was compelled to submit to an imperious necessity. I should not tell you all this—but you are so intimately acquainted with my affairs and my position, that it were ridiculous to conceal anything from you."

"I should be sorry if you did, Fanny," said the Prince, assuming his kindest tone—but only because there was a certain matter in which he required the milliner's assistance: otherwise the selfishness of his disposition would have rendered him impatient of the turn which the conversation had taken. "Proceed—tell me all that has occurred, so far as you were concerned."

"I shall not detain your attention on that point many minutes," answered Mrs. Brace, who, on her side, was merely volunteering these explanations in order to ascertain how far the sympathies of the Prince would extend in her favour—for the lapse of long years had not completely annihilated the affection which she had once borne him. "You must know," she continued, "that I yesterday paid a visit to that frightful prison of Newgate. The object of this proceeding was to supply the wretched man with the means of escape. Had any of his known friends sought an interview with him, they would have been so closely watched as to render it impossible to slip even a file into his hand—much less a packet of some size: whereas I, being looked upon as a stranger whom curiosity had led to visit the gaol, found that opportunity with comparative ease. In the packet which I was thus enabled to convey to him, there was a plan of Newgate, drawn up by some of his confederates outside the walls who were evidently full well acquainted with the interior. This plan showed him how his own cell was situated—how many rooms there were above him—and how he must work through the ceiling of each in order to arrive at the leads. The newspapers have told you the rest."

"Yes—and the whole thing was most admirably managed, truly," observed the Prince. "The idea of his accomplices getting into the house adjoining the prison—overpowering and binding the inmates—then ascending to the roof, whence they alighted on the top of Newgate in order to cut away the lead,—all this, I say, was excellent and showed a spirit of combination and enterprise worthy of a better cause. But have you any idea of what has become of the villain?"

"None—and now let us cease to allude to him," said Mrs. Brace.

"Be it so, my dear Fanny," rejoined the Prince: "for I have many things to talk to you about. In the first place, have you seen Lord Florimel?—for you have not, I hope, forgotten the little scheme which we settled together the last time I was here, and the object of which was to cure him of his sickly sentimentalism."

"I saw him very recently," answered Mrs. Brace, a deep blush again mantling her countenance—but for a reason far different from that which had previously called it up.

"And you have succeeded?" said the Prince. "Ah! that tell-tale glow upon your plump cheeks, Fanny——"

"No—I did *not* succeed," interrupted the milliner. "I lavished all my arts and wiles upon the object in view—and at the moment when I was about to triumph and he to succumb, a most unexpected intrusion dissolved the spell which I had cast upon him—and he escaped me."

"And you have not seen him since?" inquired the Prince.

"No. But he shall not escape me thus," added the milliner. "I have a thousand stratagems as yet unexhausted, and which I know well how to adopt in such a case," she observed, a wanton smile playing upon her moist lips and showing her brilliant teeth.

"Would that you were kind and amiable enough to use one of them in my behalf!" exclaimed the Prince, fixing upon her a look full of meaning.

"Ah! you have seen another houri who has smitten you," said Mrs. Brace, the wantonness of her smile now changing into archness—both irresistibly fascinating!

"You have conjectured the truth, Fanny," was the reply; "and your aid is needed to catch the wary and haughty, but beauteous bird in an inextricable mesh."

"The affair is, then, a difficult one?" said Mrs. Brace, inquiringly.

"More difficult than any amour which I have ever yet undertaken," answered the Prince; "inasmuch as the new object of my fancy is no young and inexperienced girl to be subdued by means of sophistry, promises, pledges, vows, and protestations—no woman of the middle class whom it is comparatively easy to dazzle with the splendour of my rank—no lady of easy virtue who values the title of the Prince's mistress more than her own coronet."

"Then who, in heaven's name, can she be?" inquired Mrs. Brace.

"A lady of high rank and most unimpeachable virtue," returned his Royal Highness: "a lady who has never furnished scandal with the slightest ground to assail her fair fame, and who nevertheless lives on terms of a singular and unaccountable nature with her husband. This husband is handsome—rich—elegant in manners—accomplished—generous—and in every respect formed to render a young and beautiful wife happy. But rumour declares that they live apart, though under the same roof——"

"You allude to the Countess of Desborough!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, suddenly interrupting the description which the Prince was giving her.

"I do. But are you acquainted——"

"I have the honour of her ladyship's patronage," rejoined the milliner.

"By heaven! this is fortunate," ejaculated the Prince, his countenance expressing the liveliest joy. "Does the Countess ever visit your establishment?"

"Seldom—and even then she merely stops in her carriage at the door to issue some order," said Mrs. Brace. "I usually attend her ladyship at her own mansion in Berkeley Square. Indeed, it is singular enough that I am to wait upon her the day after to-morrow at eleven o'clock in the morning."

"Oh! if your fertile brain could only devise some means of bringing that haughty woman to my arms, I would never, never cease to think of you with gratitude—the deepest gratitude, Fanny," said the Prince;—and, as he thus spoke, he took Mrs. Brace's plump, warm, white hand and pressed it tenderly.

"First let me know upon what terms you are with her ladyship," remarked the milliner. "As a matter of course you are acquainted with her: but does she suspect that you admire her? I am half-inclined to believe that you have expressed your feelings already in that quarter; and, being too precipitate, you have experienced a rebuff. Else wherefore do you denominate her proud and haughty?"

"You have guessed rightly, my dear friend," said the Prince. "It was on the very day after that disagreeable Sunday evening to which we have already alluded, that I called at Desborough House in Berkeley Square—and I saw the Countess alone. Although I had known her for some years, yet never before had she struck me as being so ravishingly beautiful. She dazzled—bewildered—fascinated me; and, unable to restrain my feelings, I cast myself at her feet. For a moment she yielded her hand to me—and I could see the fires of excitement flash from her eyes and the warm blushes glow upon her cheeks. But suddenly recovering herself, she assumed all the hauteur which would have become her so much better had she adopted that proud attitude at once. I soothed her—and our conversation proceeded: on her part, it almost seemed to encourage me—and, worked up nearly to a pitch of frenzy, I caught her in my arms. Again she abandoned herself to me for a few moments—and again did her eyes sparkle, and her cheeks glow with wanton blushes. But all in an instant she sprang from my embrace—uttered some words of reproach—and, ringing the bell, ordered my carriage to be summoned to the door, the menial of course believing that I myself must have expressed a wish to depart. But ere I left her, I was foolish enough to murmur some threat in her ears—and since that day I have not beheld her."

"Can you not read the enigma of her ladyship's conduct?" asked Mrs. Brace. "The explanation may be summed up in a few words. She is a woman of strong passions and stubborn virtue: her deeply-seated principles triumphed over her consuming desires."

"Yes—it must be as you have represented my dear friend," said the Prince.

"And therefore it will be almost impossible to corrupt the Countess of Desborough," rejoined Mrs. Brace.

"What! have you no hope to give me—no stratagem to suggest—no scheme to propose?" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "Ah! is this your fertility in resources, Fanny?"

"I do not profess to work miracles," was the answer. "Give me the common clay and I will undertake to mould it into the shape required: but if you place granite in my hands, it will resist all attempts to model it to a particular purpose."

"True!" ejaculated the Prince. "And yet I am not disposed to abandon the enterprise on account of its difficulty. Look you here, Fanny," he continued, throwing a Bank-note upon the table: "there are five hundred pounds—poor as I am, I can spare that amount for such an object. Remember, I do not mean to insult you by attributing mercenary motives to the assistance which

you so often render me: but I know that you have heavy expenses to meet in various ways—and perhaps that amount will sharpen your wits in my behalf on the present occasion."

"Well—I suppose that I must see what I can do in the matter," said Mrs. Brace. "Leave me to devise some project to smooth your path to the envied bower of the fair lady. After all, she is not toe—but flesh and blood—aye, and the blood is warm, too, that flows in her veins. But have you forgotten your Octavia?—does she no longer engage your thoughts, even for a single moment?"

"I love and adore her with a lasting passion," exclaimed the Prince: "and I shall write to her in a day or two to request her to meet me here. She believes that I am out of town for the present. But my affection for that beauteous girl is quite of a different nature from that which inspires me with regard to the Countess of Desborough. You say that you will see her ladyship the day after to-morrow in the forenoon? Well—in the evening I shall do myself the pleasure of visiting you again. Meantime farewell, dear Fanny."

And having embraced the handsome milliner, his Royal Highness took his departure.

CHAPTER LVI.

TWO SPECIMENS OF THE "NEW LIGHTS."

At the same time that the preceding dialogue was taking place in Pall Mall, a scene of scarcely a less interesting character was in progress at Mr. Meagles' lodgings in Jermyn Street.

Shortly after eight o'clock on this particular evening, Lady Letitia Lade, habited in her Amazonian garb, arrived at her friend's abode, and was immediately conducted by the agile Wasp to the parlour where his master was discussing a cigar and a bottle of Madeira.

"My dearest Letitia," exclaimed Meagles, bounding from his chair to receive and welcome the huntress; "I am so delighted you are come. There is such a treat in store for you!"

"The canting parson, I'll be bound," said the Amazon, laying aside her hat and arranging her glossy hair, as it showered in a thousand luxuriant ringlets over her well-formed shoulders.

"Exactly so," cried Meagles. "But sit down—take a glass of Madeira—light your cigarette—and I shall just have time to tell you all about it before he comes."

The beautiful woman complied with the various invitations to which Meagles gave such rapid utterance; and, lolling back in the chair while she stretched out her symmetrical legs towards the fender, she gave him a look to intimate that she was all attention.

"By the bye," said Meagles, "you have heard of Joe Warren's marvellous escape?"

"The whole town is ringing with it," responded the Amazon. "He is a perfect rival of Jack Sheppard. But let us hear about the *New Light*," she added, laughing.

"So you shall," returned Meagles. "This morning, at about ten o'clock, I wanted to go into the City to pay some money to a person of whom I bought a horse yesterday, and my gig was at the door, when as I was going down stairs, I overtook my sanctimonious neighbour, Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby. '*A fine morning, reverend sir,*' I observed.—'*Yes; under the divine blessing,*' he observed; and then he turned round and stared at me very hard indeed. '*I presume,*' he continued, after a long silence and an equally protracted survey, '*that you are the flesh-pot of Egypt who dwelleth on the first floor of this tabernacle!*'—I acknowledged without hesitation that I was the flesh-pot alluded to; and although I had a great mind to knock him down for his impudence, I restrained myself because such a proceeding on my part would only have spoilt the fun that you and I had determined to have with him.—'*Alas! alas!*' he murmured, groaning heavily at the same time, and rolling his eyes in an awful fashion: '*is it possible that such a comely gentleman as you are can be a prey to all the sinful lusts of the flesh?*'—'*Really, sir,*' said I, '*I am at a loss to understand your meaning;*' and I was getting very savage.—'*Whose chariot of the Philistines is that at the door?*' he demanded suddenly, and without taking any notice of my observation.—'*It is my gig,*' I said; '*but as for its being a chariot or belonging to the Philistines, that is quite another part of the business.*'—'*Which way is the man of wrath going?*' inquired Mr. Sneaksby.—'*If you mean me, I am going into the City,*' was my answer.—'*I will accompany the ungodly one,*' said the reverend gentleman: '*he shall put me down at the gates of Salem, that the portals thereof may delight his eyes, and invite him some day to enter.*' And without any more ado, Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby clambered up into the gig, covered his legs with my spare cloak, and made himself as comfortable as possible. So away we drove; and all along the Strand and Fleet Street the reverend gentleman regaled me with a discourse on the vanity of every possible thing in this world that he could think of. At last, when we reached the commencement of Cheapside, he desired me to take him a little way up St. Martin's le Grand; and, in compliance with his wishes, I stopped at the door of a large chapel, on the front of which the word 'SALEM' was cut in large letters. Two sleek-looking men, dressed in black, and who were standing at the entrance with faces as demure as if they were mutes, came forward and assisted the holy man to alight; and Mr. Sneaksby, without uttering a word of thanks for the ride he had enjoyed, asked me if I would not '*tarry and hear the soul-refreshing discourse*' he was about to deliver. I expressed the regret I felt at my inability to accept his kind invitation; but I said that if he would honour me with his company for an hour in the evening, in my own apartments, I should be charmed to listen to his edifying and instructive conversation. He took it quite seriously—seemed to have formed a much better opinion of me than at first—and promised to look in at half-past eight o'clock. It is that now," added Tim, consulting his watch.

Scarcely had these last words fallen from the lips of Meagles, when slow and measured steps were heard descending the stairs, as if a funeral procession were coming down.

"This is the parson," whispered Meagles, chuckling in anticipation of glorious fun.

"But he is bringing somebody with him," observed the Amazon, in a similarly subdued tone.

"The more the merrier, if they're all like himself," responded Meagles. "Hush!"

Three measured and solemn knocks were given at the room-door, as if a ghost were about to enter.

"Come in!" exclaimed Meagles, instantly putting on a demure aspect—a proceeding in which he was imitated by the beautiful huntress, at least so far as she could induce her lovely, laughing, joyous features to assume a serious expression.

The door was thrown wide open—and the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby entered the apartment with slow and sanctimonious face, followed by one of the sleek-looking men whom Tim Meagles had seen at the door of Salem Chapel.

But while these two pious individuals are settling themselves in the chairs which Meagles hastens to place near the table for their accommodation, we will just say a word respecting their external appearance.

The Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby was a man of about five-and-forty years of age. The crown of his head was bald: but dark frizzy hair stood out in a bunch, on each side, between the temple and the ear. Behind it was cut very short indeed, and lay quite flat and straight. His countenance was thin, pale, and somewhat of the hatchet description: but it would not have been disagreeable were it not for the settled expression of sanctimonious gloom and melancholy demureness which it wore. For *cant* was written in every lineament and on every feature as plainly as the word may be read on this page: *cant* was seen in the rolling of the eyes—the gradual elevation and depression of the brows—the pursing-up of the lips—the elongation of the chin—the slow and studied movements of the head. Yes—and *cant*, too, was recognised in the low white cravat that encircled the long, scraggy neck—the large shirt-frill—the clerical cut of the black coat and waistcoat with stand-up collars—and the knee breeches, bluish-black cotton stockings, and the great shoes with silver buckles. In person Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby was tall, thin, and slightly inclined to a stoop; and were it not for the measured pace at which he was accustomed to walk, his gait would have been shambling and awkward to a degree.

The individual who accompanied him, was dressed in precisely the same manner: but in person he was very different. Short, thick-set, stout, and with a large, round, rubicund countenance, he presented a somewhat sleek, oily, and comfortable appearance in comparison with his friend—save that the habitual assumption of a demure expression of features would have led a stranger to believe that a naturally jovial and contented disposition had been marred and rendered wretched by some sudden affliction which had lingered ever since in the shape of a deeply-seated and unappeasable woe. In a word, he looked like a jolly landlord fond of good ale, who having drunk himself into insolvency was compelled to adopt the profession of undertaker's mute and moisten his food with nothing better than water. Not that such was really the case in the present instance: but such, we say, was the impression his aspect would have made upon the mind of any one who saw him for the first time.

Scarcely had Mr. Sneaksby and his friend taken their seats, when their looks fell simultaneously upon Lady Lade, who was surveying them from the corner of her laughing eyes, and gently puffing the cigarette with the lips which could not altogether suppress a smile.

The Rev. Mr. Sneaksby seemed petrified with sudden astonishment—and his friend appeared precisely in the same predicament. For upwards of a minute did they gaze, open-mouthed, upon the lovely creature lounging with graceful negligence in her chair. At the first glance they fancied it was a young and dandified man with his hair dressed in a feminine style: but as their looks wandered over the beautiful white forehead with its transparent tracery of azure veins faintly marked—the profile too delicate for the male sex—the brightness of the rich moist coral lips—the total absence of beard and whisker—the fairness of the complexion—and the glossy silkiness of that raven hair,—as their eyes, we say, embraced all these fascinating details one after another, they began to entertain sore misgivings;—and when their looks settled upon the exuberant and swelling contours of the full bosom over which the riding-surtout fitted with such shapely tightness, developing rather than concealing those feminine charms of which the Amazon possessed such a voluptuous abundance, their faces gradually elongated to a degree presenting the most ludicrous aspect of woe-begone sanctimoniousness and hypocritical misery.

"Nathaniel Sneaksby," said the short gentleman, at length recovering the power of speech, and raising his eyes and lifting his hands as if he were going off in a fit, "know ye aught of that carnal creature?"

"Verily, my dearly-beloved Ichabod Paxwax, she seemeth to me like the woman of Babylon," responded the reverend gentleman, imitating his friend in respect to the elevation of the eyes and hands.

Thereupon both Tim Meagles and the huntress burst into a hearty laugh: for, so far from being offended at the observations just made, they had expected something of the kind and were highly amused at what they did hear.

"Brother Sneaksby, let us depart hence," said the gentleman whose name appeared to be Ichabod Paxwax; "for I fear that we have fallen in with the ungodly."

"It is precisely for that reason we must stay and do our holy behest," returned the reverend minister. "Peradventure we may be enabled, by our savoury discourse, to render that lost one sensible of her evil ways: for she is comely to look upon, and it were a sorrow and a shame to abandon her to the vanities by which she is encompassed round about."

"We will stay, then," said Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, with whom Mr. Sneaksby's will was evidently law.

"Now, gentlemen," exclaimed Meagles, "if you are really desirous that your presence should work salutary effects with regard to myself and my fair companion, you will accept such humble hospitality as I can offer you. There's Port, Sherry, and Madeira upon the table—and at ten o'clock there's roast turkey, chine, mashed potatoes, and so on."

"Flesh-pots!" exclaimed the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, shaking his head solemnly, but unable to prevent his lips from smacking slightly—for his nose had caught the rich odour which came up from the kitchen as he was ere now descending the stairs.

"Vanities!" murmured Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, his own lips watering amazingly and a hungry sensation coming over him.

"Yet, verily, for the stomach's sake must we do this," continued Mr. Sneaksby, filling a glass with Madeira.

"Yes, even so," added Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, pouring himself out a bumper of Port.

"Your names, gentlemen," said Meagles, "we know already. But you are not yet acquainted with my fair companion, whose fancy it is on occasions to wear a riding-dress. Allow me to introduce you to Lady Letitia Lade, wife of Sir John Lade, one of the richest baronets in England."

The announcement of the Amazon's rank and wealthy alliance produced a sudden and startling effect upon the two pious gentlemen. They each made a terrible grimace and looked awfully confused as the coarse allusions in which they had indulged flashed to their minds; and then they exchanged glances which said, as eloquently as ever eyes yet spoke—"Brother Sneaksby, what a fool you made of yourself!"—"Brother Paxwax, what an ass you are!"

Thus is it ever with religious hypocrites. They will heap their cowardly abuse and aim their malignant shafts at a plain Mrs. Smith or a simple Mrs. Jones whom they behold or suspect to be in an equivocal situation: but let the offending woman prove to be a lady of title and fortune, and the canting humbugs close their eyes at once to all her faults.

"Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen," the Amazon observed, after enjoying their confusion for nearly a minute, during which they fidgetted upon their chairs, exchanged glances ludicrously doleful, and threw furtive looks upon the lady whom they feared to have mortally offended. "I am not at all vexed at the little remarks which you thought fit to make: I am sure you were only acting conscientiously. Come, I will drink success to Salem!"

"Success to Salem!" ejaculated Meagles, filling his glass.

"Of a surety I see no harm in drinking a pious toast," observed Mr. Sneaksby, to whom Mr. Paxwax had cast a look of anxious inquiry.

"Be it so," murmured the latter gentleman; and the glasses were all drained in a moment.

"I now propose the health of our respected and esteemed friend, the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby," said Meagles; "and in order to do justice to the same, I further propose that we drink it in tumblers and not in paltry wine glasses."

"I cordially agree," said the Amazon.

"Amen," murmured Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, having received a sign of approval from his spiritual chief: whereupon he filled a tumbler to the brim with the fruity old Port

Meagles, the Amazon, and Mr. Paxwax, then imbibed their deep draughts to the honour of Mr. Sneaksby, who sate bolt upright in his chair endeavouring to screw his countenance into a complacent smile. When the ceremony was over, the reverend gentleman filled *his* tumbler almost to overflowing; and rising in a slow and solemn manner, he delivered the following address with that peculiar nasal twang and chaunting tone which had become habitual to him:—

"Christian friends, my heart boundeth like a young roe on the hill-tops at the honour ye have done me. For, alas! I am not ignorant of my own unworthiness, and how sinful a vessel I am. But, obedient to that call which so mysteriously prompted me to found the sect of *New Lights*, each member paying threepence a week to the General Fund, a penny a week for Salem, and as much more as he chooses to give,—obedient to that call, I say, I have come before the world as the originator of a system which is calculated to reconcile all conflicting opinions by proclaiming unceasing hostility to those who refuse to join us. For we are a sect militant, and can tolerate no doctrines or sentiments save the ones which we profess. On this broad basis is our institution established; and most savoury and soul-refreshing is the consciousness of aiding in so good a work. Alas! long was I a miserable, miserable sinner! For years was I a wicked linen-draper, having no thought but to make gains largely and expend them freely. My table groaned beneath the weight of luxuries—I was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. Never did my footsteps cross the threshold of church, chapel, or place of worship; and my vices, debaucheries, and immoralities were numerous as the hairs on my head. But, alas! vengeance came in the shape of one of those unclean swine whom men call sheriff's-officers; and my goods were all swept away—yea, vessels of gold and vessels of silver, and all the flesh-pots wherein I did vainly rejoice, were borne off to the auction-rooms and vended to the ungodly. Then for many weary months I sate me down in a debtors' gaol; and no friends came to see me in the gate. Naked and in want, I was turned forth upon the wide world; and, not having a human being to extend a helping hand towards me nor a morsel to put between my lips, I reflected in the bitterness of my spirit on the course which I ought to pursue. Then was it that a light dawned in upon my soul—I saw the error of my ways—I obeyed the call which at that moment I received—I set up my staff in an open place and addressed the multitude—and on that day the sect of *New Lights* sprang into existence. Such, dear Christian friends, is the outline of my career. My beloved brother in the good work, the esteemed and revered Ichabod Paxwax, who sitteth amongst us even now, was one of my earliest adherents. His life hath been chequered likewise: but our eyes are open to the vanities of this world, and we are faithfully performing the mission for which we were destined and to perfect us for which we were so sorely chastened. Oh! my Christian brother Meagles—oh! my Christian sister Letitia Lade—arise—gird up your loins—repent—heap ashes upon your head—clothe yourselves in sack-cloth—put gold and silver into your pockets and come to Salem—and ye shall be numbered amongst us—yea, even amongst the elect!"

As Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby uttered these last words, with awful contortions of the countenance, rolling of the eyes, and upraising of the arms, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax thought it only decent and becoming on his part to get up a little bye-play in the form of a gentle whimpering;—while Tim Meagles and the Amazon experienced the utmost difficulty to restrain themselves from bursting into violent peals of laughter.

The reverend gentleman, having brought his discourse to a conclusion, drained his tumbler and sate down, evidently well satisfied with the eloquence he had displayed and the impression he fancied that he had made.

"In the name of her ladyship and on my own account," observed Meagles, assuming a very solemn demeanour, "I can only say that we shall certainly visit Salem next Sunday, and that we shall con-

tribute our mite to so good a cause as that which you have propounded to us. For the present we can do nothing better than drink, in brimming tumblers, the health of our other new and esteemed friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax."

The face of the little gentleman, which had already acquired an additional rubicundity from the wine he had drunk, now became absolutely purple through excitement; and the toast having been duly honoured, he responded to the same in the following terms:—

"Dear brother Sneaksby and Christian friends, I thank you kindly. I'm a man of few words, but very capacious thoughts. My reverend leader in the good cause has given you a sketch of his life. I'll give you mine. Inscrutable decrees made me adopt the cheesemongering and bacon line. Like brother Sneaksby, I made money rapidly—but spent it faster still. I mean I got into debt. My extravagance was wonderful; and I am not ashamed now, because I glory in the present when compared with the past,—I am not ashamed now, I say, to confess that for a matter of twelve years I went to bed drunk every night of my life. Liquor was as necessary to me as victuals—or more so. Well, this couldn't last—and it didn't. The Philistines put executions into my house—the Ammonites took me to gaol. I was like Lazarus—but even worse; for I had no rich man's crumbs to eat. Like brother Sneaksby again, I was turned adrift naked and in want. As I passed the tavern and ale-houses, I would have given my soul for a draught of strong beer: I was sick unto death for a pint of ale. But I could obtain none. Being sore athirst, I entered the famous inn where I was wont to expend my gold: I craved credit for some drink—but the waiter thrust me forth into the street. I anathematised him in the bitterness of my spirit; and I denounced the tavern as a whitened sepulchre. Thus was my soul relieved of a part of the load that lay upon it. But still the thirst was torturing me; and I was fain to seek the

pump to refresh my burning tongue. Then, as I drank the cold water which my stomach loathed, I felt like brother Sneaksby again—that I had a call. I heard of the *New Lights*—I repaired to Salem—and this revered gentleman at once took me to his home, and set steaks and bottled porter before me. Then I knew that a blessing attended upon the sect which he had founded; and I unhesitatingly joined it. Oh! my dear Mr. Meagles—my Christian sister, Lady Letitia Lade—with these striking examples before your eyes, can you hesitate to come amongst us? Most welcome will ye be—chosen vessels will ye prove and the gold and silver which ye have promised to give unto Salem will help to redeem other lost creatures, even as such a miserable sinner as Ichabod Paxwax has been brought to redemption!"

With this eloquent and touching peroration, the pious gentleman drained his tumbler and sate down.

Meagles made a suitable response, and ended by proposing the health of Lady Lade Again were the tumblers filled and emptied; and then the Amazon, having returned thanks, insisted that a similar compliment should be paid to her friend Meagles. The more they drank, the less hesitation did the pious gentlemen exhibit in drinking deeper draughts;—and what with the toasts already enumerated, and others subsequently proposed and honoured, both Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax were in a very comfortable condition indeed by the time Mrs. Piggleberry and Wasp served up the promised banquet.

The landlady seemed highly delighted to find her second-floor lodger on such excellent terms with the occupant of her first storey; and Wasp appeared literally bursting with the mischievous propensities to which he did not however dare give vent in the presence of his master. One little freak he *did* perform all the same; and this was to tread with all his weight and force upon Mr. Ichabod Paxwax's toes—an incident for which he apologised with an appearance of the utmost sincerity, and which made that pious gentleman wriggle and twist for some moments in excruciating torture.

At length the turkey, the chine, and the mashed potatoes, flanked by foaming tankards of brown stout and sparkling ale, were duly spread upon the hospitable board; and Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby contrived to place himself close to the Amazon, on whose charms his eyes had been dwelling for the previous half-hour with a gloating earnestness that was only subdued by the vacancy of inebriety.

"Won't you ask a blessing, brother Sneaksby?" said Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, his eyes watering with the pain so recently inflicted upon his corn, and his mouth watering likewise, but at the odour of the turkey.

"Hic—aye—verily, I was ob—liv—livious," responded the reverend gentleman; and, joining his hands, he muttered something which was so interspersed with "hics" that it was perfectly unintelligible.

Mr. Paxwax, however, seemed satisfied; and moaned forth a guttural "Amen" at the conclusion.

Tim Meagles now carved the turkey: and the pious gentlemen did honour to the repast. Nor did they spare the brown stout, of which they seemed particularly fond; and the heavy malt liquor, mixing with the wine which they had taken in no niggard quantities, produced such an effect upon them that while the one saw two Sneaksbys and ten candles, the other beheld two Paxwaxes and a dozen lights.

Meagles and the Amazon exchanged significant glances from time to time, testifying to each other how intensely they enjoyed the evening's proceedings; and the mischievous pair kept filling the pious gentlemen's glasses the moment they were emptied.

"Brother Sneaksby," at length said the stout and red-faced saint, "I pre—he—hic—sume that we shall now—hic—wind—hic—up, with sing—ing—ing the—hic—dox—ox—ology."

"Hold your tongue, brother Paxwax — you're drunk!" exclaimed the reverend minister of Salem Chapel, who at that moment had begun to press his knee gently against the Amazon's.

"Drunk!—me drunk!" moaned the astounded Ichabod, falling back in his chair and lifting his hands in horrified amazement. "Brother Sne—eaks—hicby—did you mean that for me?"

"To be sure I did—hic," responded the reverend gentleman, darting a savage glance an his friend. "Drunk—beastly drunk, I say. Verily, Ich—hic—abod, thou hast likened thyself unto filthy swine!"

For a few seconds Mr. Paxwax gazed on his leader with the vacant stare of stupid astonishment: then, all on a sudden giving vent to his feelings in a hollow moan, he fell flat upon the floor.

"Dead drunk!" exclaimed Meagles; and Wasp being summoned to assist, the inebriated *New Light* was borne up-stairs to his pious friend's chamber, where he was undressed and put to-bed in a most hopeless state of intoxication.

But scarcely had the door closed behind Meagles and Wasp, as they carried Mr. Ichabod Paxwax away between them, when the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, apparently regardless of his companion's fate, turned towards Lady Letitia Lade; and, assuming as tender an expression as the peculiar configuration of his countenance and his own obfuscated ideas would permit, he said, "Yea, verily, sweet woman, thou art comely to—hic—look upon. But doth not that tight fitting coat compress—ess thy form—hic—somewhat inconveniently?"

"Oh! not in the least, I can assure you," exclaimed the mischievous Amazon, allowing him to press his knee more closely still against her own, and bending upon him a look of encouragement.

"Of a surety I am surprised that thou art easy in such an attire," continued Mr. Sneaksby, leaning forward: "methought it must be tight and even painful *here*."

And, as he spoke, he passed his arm round the Amazon's waist: then, flattering himself that as she only smiled gaily with her red lips and her wicked eyes, she was far from offended at his proceeding, he prepared to refresh himself with the luxury of a kiss.

But at the same moment the huntress raised her hand and dealt him such a smart and ringing box on the ears, that the pious gentleman was knocked clean off his chair and levelled as completely with the floor as his friend Ichabod had been, though from another cause, before him.

"Holloa! what's the matter?" exclaimed Meagles, returning to the room at the instant.

"Only the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby making love to me," responded the Amazon, almost suffocating with the hilarious laughter in which she now indulged.

Meagles comprehended what had passed; and

throwing himself on a seat, he gave way to an equally hearty burst of merriment.

Slowly and demurely did the minister of Salem Chapel rise from the carpet; and when he had gained his legs, his body swayed backward and forward for several moments before he could even steady himself by leaning on the back of his chair. First he gazed in a dull and vacant manner at Meagles—then his eyes settled in a similarly meaningless fashion upon Lady Letitia Lade;—and then he burst out into a horse-laugh as the best means of covering his confusion.

"Come—resume your seat, reverend sir," said the Amazon, with a good-humoured smile; "and we shall be very excellent friends so long as you don't attempt to make love to me. Remember," she added archly, "I am *a carnal creature—a woman of Babylon*—and you must not render me worse."

Mr. Sneaksby looked particularly foolish—the more so because he was particularly drunk: but, cheered by the good-natured manner in which Meagles now pressed him to wind up with a glass of whiskey-and-water, he accepted the invitation and poured the steaming punch down his throat as if it were anything rather than alcohol.

Presently an oath slipped from his tongue—then his conversation grew slightly loose and indecorous—and, having vociferated a bacchanalian song by way of concluding the evening's entertainment, he staggered off to bed, with the emphatic declaration that "he'd be damned if he wouldn't denounce that infernal drunken scoundrel Paxwax next Sunday, from the pulpit of Salem Chapel."

CHAPTER LVII.

THE OLD BAILEY.

At nine o'clock on the morning following the incidents just related, Martin and Ramsey were ushered by Soper into the dock of the criminal tribunal in the Old Bailey.

The weather was fine and frosty—and the sunbeams, illuminating the crisp fresh air, penetrated into the Court, as if by playing on the countenances of the accused they could diminish the ghastliness of their aspect.

The Grand Jury had already returned true bills of indictment against the prisoners: the petty jury had been sworn and were located in their box;—the Recorder was seated behind his little desk upon the bench, at one end of which a couple of Aldermen were lounging idly and conversing upon the grand entertainment given by the Lord Mayor on the previous day;—and the barristers were untying their bundles of briefs (sham ones in many instances) on the table around which they were placed.

The gallery and the body of the hall were crowded: for the circumstances connected with the case had produced a deep sensation—and many elegantly-dressed ladies were present to hear the proceedings.

The two persons chiefly interested in the trial that was about to ensue, were care-worn, woe-begone, and overwhelmed with confusion. The train of thoughts that swept through their minds as they took their stand in the fatal dock, recalled to their remembrance the happy days of innocence which were gone, never to be renewed; and, now that it was too late, bitterly—bitterly did they curse the folly—the insanity—the madness which had hurried them into those ways of crime whence there was no retreating!

The usher proclaimed silence in the Court—the witnesses were ordered to withdraw—and the prisoners were called upon to plead. To this demand Martin responded, "Not guilty," in a faint and scarcely audible tone: but Ramsey, summoning all his courage to his aid by a desperate effort, gave the same reply in a firmer and louder voice.

The counsel for the prosecution then rose and addressed the jury.

He began by explaining that there were two separate indictments against the prisoners at the bar. The first charged them with forging certain powers of attorney, and with passing spurious coin into the circulation of this realm: the second accused them of conspiring to kidnap, carry off, and keep in confinement Sir Richard Stamford, baronet. It was on the former indictment that they were now charged; and on the allegations set forth therein were they to take their trial. The learned counsel went on to state the case at considerable length: but as we shall detail the evidence adduced in support of the prosecution, it is unnecessary to give the opening speech.

Sir Richard Stamford was first summoned to the witness-box, which he entered with the air of a man determined to perform a painful duty: for, in the generosity of his heart, he even pitied the two wretches who had worked such deplorable and wholesale mischief against him. His appearance was the signal for a murmur of surprise and sympathy throughout the hall,—surprise at the great resemblance which he bore to the Prince of Wales—and sympathy on account of the misfortunes which he had endured.

Martin hung down his head through shame; and Ramsey, having darted one furtive glance at the man whom he had so deeply injured, never once looked again towards the witness-box during the hour and a half that it was occupied by the baronet.

Sir Richard Stamford, in answer to the leading questions put by the counsel for the prosecution, recited most of those particulars with which the reader is already acquainted. He explained how he had first been induced to enter into partnership with the prisoners—the amounts he had invested in the bank—the trust he reposed in Martin and Ramsey—and the implicit belief which he put in their continual statements relative to the prosperity of the establishment. He went on to detail the circumstances which led him at last and all on a sudden to investigate the books—the shock which he experienced on discovering the firm to be in a state of bankruptcy—and the conversation which he had overheard between Ramsey and Martin at the tavern at Aylesbury. In the course of that conversation Martin explained to his accomplice in iniquity how his visit to London had been attended with complete success, *and how the forgeries had been so skilfully executed that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in selling out the stock at the Bank of England.* Sir Richard Stamford proceeded to observe that Martin and Ramsey, on the same occasion, congratulated each other on the good provision they had made for themselves; and

that they alluded to a certain Joseph Warren, nick-named the Magsman, with whom they had had previous dealings in respect to spurious coin. The baronet next explained the tragic scene which took place at the Manor, and which involved the suicidal attempt made by his wife—an act ultimately causing her death. He then related how he was kidnapped and conveyed to the dungeon in Thacker's Court—how he was required, as the price of his liberty, to sign some paper with the contents of which he was not made acquainted—how he refused to affix his signature thereto—and how he escaped in a few days by the assistance of a certain Mr. Page. Lastly, Sir Richard Stamford explained how he had sought and obtained an interview with his wife in her last moments—how he had pardoned her for all her sinfulness towards him—how she had confessed her guilt in the presence of a magistrate who attended at her death-bed on purpose to receive her statement—and how with her last breath she had proclaimed her husband's innocence of all the misdeeds imputed to him.

The Buckinghamshire justice of the peace who was present, as just described, at Lady Stamford's death, was the second witness examined. A paper was put into his hand; and he declared it to be the depositions which he had taken down from the dying woman's lips. The contents went far to confirm Martin and Ramsey's guilt in respect of the misappropriation of the funds of the bank, and likewise to prove her husband's innocence in that respect. With regard to the forgeries and the issue of spurious coin the document said little; as Lady Stamford had never been made acquainted with those facts by her paramour Ramsey: but the paper set forth that when Sir Richard accused Ramsey of those crimes, on the memorable night at the Manor, he did not attempt to deny them.

The next witness called was Mr. Peter Grumley, the police-officer. He deposed to the capture of the prisoners effected in the manner already known to the readers; and on being shown a certain paper, he declared that he had discovered it in a cupboard when searching the house in Thacker's Court. This paper set forth that Sir Richard Stamford conveyed all his property to Martin and Ramsey for the benefit of the creditors of the bank; that he acknowledged to have committed certain frauds and forgeries, which he implored them to settle in order to rescue his name from infamy; that on those conditions he would depart to America, with the express understanding that he was never to return to England; and that five hundred a-year were to be allowed him for the rest of his life by the aforesaid Martin and Ramsey. This paper, which was drawn up in the handwriting of Ramsey (as proved by another witness), was without date or signature, and was evidently the one which it was sought to coerce Sir Richard Stamford into signing when he was imprisoned in the dungeon.

Mr. Page was now summoned to the box, which he entered with a smirking self-sufficient air; and, having complacently surveyed both judge and jury, he proceeded to answer the questions put to him by the counsel for the prosecution. He explained that, being entrapped into the power of certain villains, he was incarcerated in the same dungeon with Sir Richard Stamford—that they escaped thence—and that accident had thrown into his hand a document which had already been adduced in evidence at the police-court. This was a letter addressed to *Joseph Warren, at the Beggar's Staff, Horslydown;* and it was likewise proved (in the course of the trial) to be in Ramsey's handwriting. We recapitulate its contents, as being a necessary link in the chain of evidence, although they are already known to the reader:—

"*March* 17*th*, 1794.

"The terms are accepted. A Bank-note for a hundred pounds is enclosed in this letter. You will acknowledge the receipt thereof, directing your reply, as heretofore, to Mr. M——, putting 'private' in the corner outside the letter. We will take three thousand in the first instance, and three thousand more this day six months. You will pack the *goods* up in a square deal box, the boards of which must be at least three-quarters of an inch thick; and the lid must be well nailed down. Book it per carrier; and print '*C. and Co.*' in the corner of the card of address. On receipt of the box, the other hundred pound note shall be duly forwarded."

The next witness examined on the present occasion was the cashier of the late banking establishment at Aylesbury. He proved the handwriting of the document found in the house at Thacker's Court, and that of the letter addressed to Joseph Warren: it was Mr. Ramsey's. The cashier went on to show that Sir Richard Stamford never interfered with the business, and never overdrew his own private account. He perfectly well recollected the arrival of a box containing gold, or alleged to contain gold, about the commencement of the Spring of the previous year (1794). The contents were three thousand guineas, or what he (the cashier) took to be guineas; and Mr. Martin himself mixed them up with several thousands of guineas previously in the safe. The whole was paid away in due course. He thought the box came from Coutts and Co., the London agents of the bank.

The next witness was a clerk in the Bank of England. This gentleman proved that extensive forgeries had been committed on that establishment: powers of attorney authorising the sale of stock invested in the names of several persons, had been acted upon by Mr. Martin who was in the habit of receiving the dividends for that stock. These powers of attorney were forgeries. Mr. Martin had attended at the Bank with a stock-broker to effect the sales and receive the proceeds.

Two or three witnesses were then called to prove that they had never signed their names to the powers of attorney just alluded to: nor had they in any way authorised the sale of the stock specified therein.

This closed the case for the prosecution; and a barrister, who had been retained for the purpose, entered upon the defence of the two prisoners. But, although a man of great talent, he could not grapple with the stubborn facts which had been adduced. The forgery, at all events, was completely made out: and the learned gentleman was compelled to do the best he could for his clients in the shape of sophistry, specious declamation, and impassioned appeal to the jury. At the conclusion of his speech, he called several witnesses to testify to the characters of the accused; and this course gave the prosecuting counsel the right of reply—a privilege which is detestable in the estimation of all humane men, but which in political cases serves the purposes of despotic Ministers and bloodthirsty Attorneys-General most admirably.

The Recorder summed up the evidence with firmness and impartiality. In fact judges are nearly always honest and dispassionate save in such instances as those to which we have alluded; and then, with but few exceptions, they are the rank and unblushing partisans of the Government.

It was five o'clock in the evening of this memorable day, when the jury retired to deliberate in their private room.

For upwards of half-an-hour they remained absent; —and during this interval the prisoners exhibited a nervous anxiety which, guilty though they assuredly were, was piteous to behold. Martin's countenance was ghastly pale; and, as he was advanced in years, the spectacle which he presented to the view was one that might well engender sympathy. Ramsey vainly endeavoured to appear firm; his quivering lip—the frequent spasmodic movements of his arms—the occasionally wild glaring of his eyes—the twitching of the flesh at the corners of his eyes—and the glances which he threw every other moment towards the door by which the jury had left their box,—all these were indications of a soul-crushing suspense and an appalling terror.

At length that door opened—and the jurymen returned into the Court. Slowly and solemnly—like men who were about to take part in a funeral ceremony—did they resume their seats. All eyes were fixed upon them—a pin might have been heard to drop—the breath of every one present was suspended.

In the minute that elapsed between the re-appearance of the jury and the delivery of their verdict by the foreman, the two prisoners lived whole centuries of indescribable anguish—passed through the bitterness of ten thousand deaths!

Scenes of the busy world without flashed through their minds: all the pleasures, delights, and enjoyments of existence swept across their imaginations with a pageantry the brilliancy of which was heightened a myriad times by the contrast which their own awful condition presented.

Could they be doomed to die?—oh! no—it was impossible! What earthly power could snatch them away from existence?—what human hand dared grasp the fatal thunderbolts of immortal Jove to hurl at *them?*

It appeared a dream—a whirling, maddening, horrible dream,—a frightful and appalling vision from which they would presently awake to the consciousness of its delusion and their own safety!

But—Ah!—what is that dreadful word which has just stricken their ears?

"GUILTY!"—— Oh! it is no dream—no vision: it is a fearful reality;—they are awake—and they are *there!*

Yes: the jury have given in their verdict;—and the Recorder places the black cap upon his head.

The Clerk of the Court calls the prisoners by their names: he inquires of them whether they have any reason to allege why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon them!

Reasons!—yes—ten thousand reasons! For the one is an old man who has but a few years to live in the ordinary course of nature, and it would be shocking to deprive him of that short, that trifling, that poor insignificant span: the other is young, in the prime of life, and with the vigorous constitution that promises half a century more of existence in this world! Oh! these facts suggest a myriad reasons wherefore they should not be doomed to die!

But their tongues cleave to the roofs of their mouths—they cannot utter a word—they cannot give vent to a single syllable; and yet they have so much to say!

An awful consternation is upon them: the lights in the Court appear to burn blue—the faces that are turned from all sides towards the dock, seem ghastly and hideous—the human beings by whom they are surrounded, assume spectral shapes to their imagination—the jury look like twelve fiends—the very judge is the arch-demon in their eyes!

Hark!—what are those solemn words which now break upon the awful stillness that had followed the crier's proclamation for silence?

'Tis the death-sentence which the Recorder is pronouncing!

But the prisoners cannot understand what he says: their brain is whirling fearfully—the lights are dancing before their eyes—spectral forms seem to be gathering in around them. Nevertheless they can comprehend this much—*that they are doomed to be hanged by the neck until they are dead*; and the judge winds up the barbarian sentence by invoking *the Almighty to have mercy upon their souls!*

The turnkey touches them upon the shoulder: they mechanically follow him away from the dock—and in a few minutes Martin is the tenant of one condemned cell, and Ramsey of another!

It being now past six o'clock the Recorder quitted the Court, to join the Sheriffs, the Ordinary, the Governor of Newgate, and some of the barristers, at the dinner-table; and the Common Serjeant took his seat upon the bench.

Stephen Price (*alias* the Big Beggarman) and Briggs were then placed in the dock.

They were charged with having kidnapped and detained in unlawful custody Sir Richard Stamford and Mr. Page; and, the case being thoroughly proven against them, they were sentenced to transportation for fifteen years.

With this trial the proceedings of the session terminated.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DUCHESS AND THE COUNTESS.

IT was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon—and while Martin and Ramsey were in the presence of their judge—that a lady alighted from a splendid equipage at the door of the Earl of Desborough's mansion in Berkeley Square. She was immediately ushered with great respect to one of the magnificent drawing-rooms belonging to that dwelling: and while she is waiting there until the Countess makes her appearance, we will indulge in a few words descriptive of her personal charms.

And charming she assuredly was, although in the thirty-eighth year of her age. Nature had lavished all her choicest gifts upon her form; and, though her countenance habitually wore a smiling sweetness of expression, yet there was an air of voluptuousness about her, surrounding and enveloping her as with a halo, that engendered undefinable sensations in the breast of the beholder—as if it were from love that she had borrowed the impress of her witching beauty!

Her hair was of a rich auburn, which wantoned in a thousand glossy and shining ringlets upon her shoulders, and gave her so youthful an appearance that, when it was thus arranged, she seemed to have scarcely reached her thirtieth year. Her eyes were large and of a deep hazel hue,—sometimes languishing and tender—at others lustrous with an overwhelming light,—sometimes with love beaming in every glance—at others flashing with the natural but latent haughtiness of a proud disposition.

Her complexion was of the purest white, save where on each plump and well-rounded cheek it blushed into the rose's hue; and her lips, full but not thick, were of the brightest coral. Her teeth were small, beautifully white, and faultlessly even; and, when she laughed, it appeared as if they were musical pearls that thus sent forth a delicious, soft, and silvery sound.

Her figure was on a large scale, but admirably proportioned, the fulness of the bust setting off the wasp-like symmetry of the waist: her arms were robust, but stainlessly white and exquisitely rounded, —and the graceful majesty of her walk indicated the fine and well-modelled length of limb which imparted to her gait its classic elegance and statuesque dignity.

Such was Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire—the idol of that sphere of fashion over which she presided with unquestioned sway, and from which she received all the blandishments of flattery and all the homage of worship and devotion.

Throwing herself upon a sofa with the ease and familiarity of one who knew and felt that she was in the abode of an intimate friend, the brilliant Duchess waited until Lady Desborough made her appearance; and when the latter entered the room after a few minutes' delay, their greeting was reciprocally cordial.

"Dearest Georgiana," said the Countess, "I am delighted to see you. It is an age since we last met."

"Nearly six months, Eleanor," responded the Duchess of Devonshire. "My tour in Scotland has been protracted beyond my original expectations: but at length, behold me once more in happy London. I only returned with his Grace last evening—and my first visit is paid to you."

"Your friendship, dear Georgiana, is most soothing and consolatory to me," said the Countess of Desborough, an involuntary sigh escaping her bosom.

"Heavens! you are unhappy," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, taking Eleanor's hand and pressing it affectionately. "Tell me, my beloved friend—what is the matter with you?—wherefore do you sigh?"

"Oh! it is nothing — nothing, I can assure you," answered the Countess, hastily. "But I have been somewhat indisposed to-day — a partial headache——"

"My dearest Eleanor, this excuse would pass current with a mere acquaintance," interrupted her Grace; "but not with a sincere—a very sincere friend. Recollect Eleanor, we have known each other since our childhood, I might almost say—notwithstanding there is a difference of ten years between my age and yours. Therefore, as an elder sister do I speak to you—for as a sister I love you, Eleanor."

"How can I sufficiently testify my gratitude for these generous expressions?" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough.

"By making me the confidant of your secret sorrow," was the prompt answer: "for a secret sorrow am I assured that you cherish. But imagine not for an instant, Eleanor, that a base and contemptible feeling of curiosity urges me thus to address you. Intimate as I have been with you—devoted in our friendship as we are towards each other—this is the first time that I have ever ventured to touch upon so delicate a topic. Often and often have I beheld you pensive — thoughtful — melancholy—unhappy: and I have longed to throw my arms round your neck, and implore you to confide your sorrows to me, that I might sympathise and console. Six years have now passed since you became the Countess of Desborough—and I know that the alliance which you have formed has not ensured your felicity. Nay—this much is no secret with the world generally: but the cause is unsuspected—unknown—beyond all power of conjecture. To me, I confess, it is the greatest of mysteries: for the noble earl, your husband, appears to possess every qualification adapted to render your existence a paradise and win your best affections. Tell me, then, dearest Eleanor —tell your sincerest and most attached friend the source of your sorrow. Perhaps I may be enabled to counsel and advise: at all events I am certain to sympathise with you and offer such consolation as it may be in my power to impart."

"The world, then, is aware that his lordship and myself dwell not together in the sweet harmony of matrimonial bliss?" said the Countess of Desborough, casting down her looks, while a deep carnation suffused her clear olive cheeks.

"Such is indeed the case, Eleanor," returned Georgiana. "But, understand me well—the world attributes no blame to you—your reputation is unsullied—scandal has never dared to whisper a syllable against you."

"Oh! it would be cruel indeed if it were otherwise!" exclaimed Eleanor, with a degree of bitterness which surprised her friend. "But pray let us change the conversation—let us pass to some other topic."

"Have you no faith in friendship?" asked the Duchess of Devonshire, in a gentle tone of reproach: "can you not conceive that by unbosoming yourself to me, you will be consoled and comforted? Or do you fancy that the giddy whirl of pleasure and fashionable dissipation has rendered me so thoroughly heartless ——"

"Oh! no—no!" interrupted the Countess, shocked by the cruel suspicion thus implied: "I know that you are everything kind — generous — affectionate ——"

"Then you will trust me?—you will confide in me?" said Georgiana, her tone assuming the tenderness of the most unfeigned friendship. "You do not require from my lips the assurance that your secret, whatever it may be, will rest as a sacred deposit in my bosom—never, never to be revealed."

"I know not what to say!" exclaimed Eleanor, clasping her hands in a sudden paroxysm of anguish, while a tear rolled down each blushing cheek. "I am bewildered, Georgiana—I am uncertain how to act! Your kindness prompts me to unbosom myself without reserve: but, on the other hand, feelings which I cannot explain——"

"Oh! you are indeed unhappy, my sweet friend," interrupted her Grace; "and yet you hesitate to allow me the means of sympathising with you! Eleanor, this is cruel—this is unjust—for you are

well aware that since you were eight years old and I was eighteen, our attachment to each other has never been for a moment marred by a harsh word or a cold look."

"This is true—most true," murmured the Countess of Desborough; "and were I to make any one a confidant of the secret sorrow which, I admit, weighs upon my heart, that friend would be yourself."

"Is it possible that you can love another?—that you hate your husband for that other's sake?" ejaculated the Duchess, a sudden idea striking her.

"No — no," responded the Countess of Desborough: then, in an altered and far more solemn tone, she added, "Never yet have I felt what love is!"

"You did not love the Earl when you married him?" exclaimed Georgiana, profoundly surprised. "This, then, was at least a secret which you kept from me. But surely his conduct must have been such as to win your affections?—surely he cannot seem tender, loving, and attentive in public, and ill-treat you in private?"

"Not for worlds would I have you think so ill of Francis!" cried the Countess, emphatically. "No—he has surrounded me with all the elements of that happiness which gold can procure; and his constant study is to render my life as agreeable as it may be."

"This mystery is incomprehensible!" said the Duchess. "I am pained—grieved to the inmost recesses of my heart—to think that my best friend should be unhappy, and that she should fear to entrust me with the cause of her sorrow."

"You know not how I long — how ardently I crave to unbosom myself to you, dearest Georgiana," returned the Countess, bending upon her companion those eyes which were usually so brilliant and lustrous, but which were now so mournful and melting. "Your words have already penetrated like a balm into my soul—the tender sympathy which you have manifested towards me, has done me good. Yes—the love of a dear friend must be an incalculable relief: but it would kill me to think that this friend should ever have cause to blush for her in whose behalf she has shown such generous feelings."

"I blush for you, Eleanor!" exclaimed the Duchess, more and more astonished at this species of self-accusation on the part of the Countess: "Oh! that were impossible! I know you to be virtue itself."

"But is there not the sin of the thoughts as well as of the actions?" inquired Eleanor, in a subdued and mournful tone. "Alas! since the confession must be made—and I see that I cannot resist the influence which prompts me now to unbosom my soul to you——"

"Speak freely—fearlessly," said the Duchess, observing that her friend still hesitated. "It will prove one of the most delicious moments of my life if I can in any way sooth the secret sorrow which you cherish."

"Ere now, my beloved Georgiana," resumed the Countess, "you complimented me by saying that I was virtue itself. But you know not how unworthy I am of the good opinion which you have thus formed of me! It is true that if the chastity of the body be all that is required to constitute virtue, I am indeed virtuous. But may not a polluted soul dwell in a chaste body, even as a pure soul may inhabit a body that is polluted? The woman whose honour is violently wrested from her by the miscreant ravisher, is still chaste in mind though tainted in person: and, on the other hand, the woman who is even a virgin in bodily innocence may be a very Messalina in passions, cravings, and desires. Do you understand me, my dear friend?" asked the Countess, without raising her head, but with a burning blush suffusing her entire countenance and pouring its crimson glow over her neck, her shoulders, and her bosom.

"I understand that you have involved yourself in a net of sophistry and metaphysical argument which cannot regard yourself," responded the Duchess. "It is true that virtue may be a negative quality only, in some instances: but as you have already assured me that you love no man, you have no possible inducement to prove faithless to your husband. Were you enamoured of some handsome youth, and were you on that account wrestling against temptation, it would not be difficult to comprehend your position."

"And then, perhaps, the crime were more venial than when the soul has to combat with passions and cravings which have no particular object to excite them," murmured Eleanor, covering her countenance with her hands.

"I understand you at length!" whispered the Duchess of Devonshire, leaning towards her friend on whose shoulder she placed her hand: "you are upon those unhappy terms with your husband which deprive you of the enjoyment of conjugal rites—and you are not of a temperament to allow so saint-like an existence to be even tolerable. If this be the case, Eleanor, you need not blush to avow it—for I candidly admit that the result of such privation would be the same with me."

"And yet we are so differently situated," exclaimed the Countess, raising her blushing face timidly towards that of the brilliant and voluptuous Georgiana: "for as yet you have only obtained an insight into a portion of my secret—you have only learnt the least and most insignificant part of my weakness. Alas! you alluded to the unhappy terms on which I exist with my husband: but you have yet to hear and be amazed at the cause of that severance which is scarcely veiled by the mockery of our living beneath the same roof."

"And this cause—what can it be?" asked Georgiana, taking her friend's hand and pressing it between both her own.

The Countess of Desborough hesitated upwards of a minute: she was evidently afraid of giving a reply to the question—and she was unable to find language wherewith to frame that answer. But suddenly calling all her courage to aid her in achieving a confession which had gone thus far, she placed her lips to the ears of the Duchess, and hastily whispered a few words.

The magnificent Georgiana started as if a serpent had stung her—so amazed was she by the extraordinary and unexpected revelation which she had thus heard: but Eleanor, devoured with shame, and unable to endure the look of mingled incredulity, surprise, and compassion which the Duchess fixed upon her, threw herself on the bosom of her friend, and, concealing her burning countenance there, gave vent to her feelings in a flood of tears.

"My poor Eleanor, be comforted," at length said the Duchess of Devonshire: "it is not grief

which you should pour forth—but vengeance which you should crave."

"No—no: not vengeance," sobbed the generous-souled Countess: "for he has done all that mortal could to make amends for a flagrant wrong. Alas!" she continued, raising her head, and casting down the eyes on the long lashes of which trembled the pearly drops; "I hate and detest myself when I think that such a circumstance should embitter my days. But vainly, vainly do I struggle with those passions which consume me—those desires which rage at times so furiously in my bosom!"

"Eleanor, you are an angel of virtue, whereas you would represent yourself to be a demoness of profligate thoughts and wanton ideas!" exclaimed Georgiana. "There is something more than a negative virtue in your chastity—your forbearance—your purity! But, believe me," added the Duchess emphatically,—"believe me when I declare that you will continue to exist the veriest simpleton in Europe, if you thus adhere to that virtue which is nothing more nor less than a sentimentalism so highly refined and so marvellously sublimated as to be incompatible with the grossness of even the purest mortal nature."

"What would you advise me, Georgiana?" asked the Countess, trembling with an undefinable sensation of mingled terror and delight—terror at the idea of being tempted into evil, and delight at the thought of the evil into which she was thus to be tempted.

"I would regard what you term virtue as a chain and would cast it off," was the unhesitating and emphatic response.

"Oh! I regret now that I have made you my confidant," exclaimed Eleanor: "for you give form and substance to those ideas the existence of which in my own heart I have never until now dared to acknowledge to myself!"

"You are a perfect phenomenon, Eleanor," returned the Duchess. "But I have a great mind to tell you a little secret of my own—for I also have a secret, I can assure you," she added, with an arch smile of ineffable sweetness.

"Oh! but your secret is not one that gives you pain, and that you blush to own!" said the Countess.

"It certainly gives me no pain," rejoined the Duchess of Devonshire: "and yet I may perhaps blush as I reveal it to you. But if I make you my confidant in that respect, it is only to prove to you that I really regard you in the light of a sister."

"And this secret?" said Eleanor, her curiosity being raised.

"It is explained in a few words," was the response. "I have a lover!"

"Doubtless! Worshipped and adored as you are, Georgiana," said the comparatively unsophisticated Countess, "you have hundreds. But a lover in any other sense of the term——"

"Yes—a lover in *that* sense," interrupted the Duchess. "I mean that I have yielded to a phantasy—a whim—a wanton caprice—and have erred without one hundredth part of the excuse which you would have for erring in a similar manner."

"Is this possible, Georgiana?" exclaimed the Countess, with an astonishment most real and unfeigned.

"It is true, I can assure you," answered the profligate patrician. "And now are you not ashamed of me?"

"No: I begin to see things in a new light," rejoined Eleanor, gradually becoming familiarised with the contemplation of immorality; and when she remembered that the Princess Sophia herself had yielded to the delights of illicit love, she wondered that she should ever have adhered so rigidly to her own virtuous principles.

"It is not a year ago," continued the Duchess, "that I succumbed to that phantasy and became faithless to my husband. I was seated alone, and in a pensive mood, on a sofa in the Red Drawing-room at Devonshire House. It was between four and five in the afternoon. Presently the door was thrown open—and a visitor was announced. You know him well: he is one of the handsomest men in Europe. He seated himself by my side upon the sofa—and a conversation on various indifferent topics progressed for some little time. At length I observed that he was surveying me with an earnest attention—an attention which at the moment I fancied to amount almost to rudeness; and the blood rushed to my cheeks. He threw himself on his knees before me—took my hand—pressed it to his lips—and declared that if he had offended me, he would never rise until he had obtained my pardon."

"How singular!" ejaculated the Countess, "Something very much resembling all this, occurred to myself about three weeks ago. Yes—I also was seated alone and in a pensive mood—in this very room, and on this very sofa—and a visitor came: he is certainly one of the handsomest men in England—and you know him well——But pray continue your narrative, my dear friend," cried Eleanor, suddenly interrupting herself in the midst of the broken explanations which she was giving in a mood of almost involuntary musing.

"Well—as I was observing," resumed the Duchess, "*my* visitor vowed that he would not rise until I pardoned him—which I hastened to do, although, if questioned, I could scarcely have defined the offence which he had committed. Placing himself again by my side, he dexterously and with amazing artifice continued the discourse in such a manner, that he gradually brought it to a point at which he suddenly, and as if in a burst of unconquerable enthusiasm, declared his admiration—his passion—his love. I know not what reply I made: but I recollect well that in another moment I was clasped in his arms——"

"More singular still!" ejaculated the Countess. "The adventure which I considered to be so insulting to myself, was precisely the same."

"But the results were assuredly very different," returned the Duchess: "for whereas you must have passed pure and immaculate through the ordeal, I accepted the declaration of love—and that same evening I visited Carlton House privately and in disguise."

"Carlton House!" exclaimed Eleanor, with increasing wonderment.

"Yes—for the lover to whom I have alluded is the Prince of Wales," rejoined Georgiana.

"And it was the Prince of Wales who would have made a victim of me!" cried the Countess.

"Then is it most singular that my love-story should have elicited yours, the hero being the same," said the Duchess, by no means chagrined at

this proof of her royal paramour's fickleness. "I am not jealous of the Prince: it were ridiculous to be so. I am well aware that his love-adventures are innumerable; and if I were to sigh each time I learn that I have a rival in his caprices—for we will not call them affections—I should be only making myself miserable from morning to night."

"True!" murmured Eleanor, in whose bosom new and exciting thoughts had been engendered by all that the Duchess of Devonshire had said to her on this occasion.

"And therefore, my dear friend," added the wanton and voluptuous Georgiana, "if you should think fit to lend a willing ear to the Prince's seductive words, I shall not experience the slightest annoyance. But I must now say farewell, Eleanor—and I shall expect to see you at Devonshire House in the course of to-morrow or next day: for I must assuredly become your tutress and guide into the realms of pleasure. Adieu, my dear friend."

With these words, the Duchess embraced Lady Desborough, and took her departure.

Eleanor had escorted her Grace as far as the landing outside the apartment;—and, as she was returning slowly and in a thoughtful mood to her seat upon the sofa, it suddenly flashed to her mind like a glare of lightning, that if any one had happened to be in the inner drawing-room it were easy to have overheard some portion, if not the whole of the preceding conversation, the two saloons being only separated from each other by folding-doors.

A terrible sickness seized upon the heart of the Countess as this source of alarm sprang up in her mind; and opening one of the doors, she entered the adjacent apartment.

But a vertigo appeared to fasten upon her brain when she caught sight of her husband—yes, the Earl of Desborough—seated at the table apparently bending, over a book, and with his back towards her

She staggered a few paces and was on the point of falling: but in a moment she perceived the tremendous precipice on which she stood—in an instant she saw the necessity of gathering all her courage and presence of mind to her aid, if she wished to relieve herself from a state of awful suspense and ascertain whether he had actually even heard her conversation with the Duchess, or not.

"What! are you here?" she said, in a faint and faltering tone, advancing at the same time and laying her hand upon his shoulder.

"Ah! my dearest Eleanor," he exclaimed, starting up: *but it struck her that he was very pale!*

"Have you been here long?" she asked, her tone becoming still more tremulous, and her entire frame quivering like an aspen leaf.

"Yes—that is, not many minutes," he replied, instantly correcting his first monosyllabic answer. "I have been reading that book, and was so absorbed in its contents that I really forgot how long I could have been here."

And he smiled—but, as it struck her, *with, a ghastly attempt to conceal horrible thoughts!*

"What book is it?" she inquired, hastily bending down her head to hide the shame which flushed her cheeks—and not shame only, but torturing terror of the most agonising nature.

No pen can describe the exquisite acuteness to which her feelings were now wrought up, when she saw that the volume lying open on the table was upside down! The barbed point of a lance thrust into her heart and then torn violently out again—supposing that it were possible to live through such an infernal process of cruelty—could not have been accompanied with an anguish more rending than that which the unhappy lady now felt. Her brain was on fire—molten lead was circulating in her veins—the tortures of hell were lacerating her soul.

But suddenly it flashed to her imagination that her husband might have turned the book in this manner at the moment when he started from his seat at the words which she had addressed to him and on feeling her hand upon his shoulder. Revived by the hope, which was instantly followed by the thought that if he *had* overheard her conversation with the Duchess it would be impossible for him to appear even as cool and collected as he was, Eleanor raised her countenance again, saying, "Were you not aware that an old friend of mine was with me just now? She would have been delighted to see you."

"Yes—I understood that you had company—the Duchess of Devonshire, was it not?" observed the Earl, in a tone which struck the Countess to be ominously peculiar and unnatural. "But I did not choose to disturb you," he added, almost immediately: "besides, I do not feel very well this afternoon."

"Has anything occurred to vex or annoy you, Francis?" inquired the Countess: and, as she spoke, she darted a rapid but searching—scrutinising—penetrating glance upon her husband's countenance.

"Annoy me! Oh! nothing—nothing, I can assure you, dear Eleanor," he exclaimed, taking her hand and carrying it to his lips: then, instantly dropping it—and, as she thought at least, with singular abruptness, as if it had suddenly become loathsome to him after his mouth had thus touched it—he said, "No—I have nothing to annoy me—unless it be the perverse conduct of Fernanda, in so obstinately refusing the reparation which Arthur Eaton so honourably offered. Have you seen Fernanda to-day?"

"She has kept her room, as you know, almost ever since her return home a few days ago," answered Eleanor, gradually becoming reassured, though still experiencing an oppressive uneasiness—for she could not subdue the idea that there *was* something remarkably strange, forced, and unnatural in her husband's manner.

At this moment a domestic entered to announce that dinner was served.

The Earl instantly proffered Eleanor his arm; and, as he escorted her to the dining-room below, he turned the conversation on some leading topic of the day, and which was quite distinct from their own concerns: then, after they were seated at table, he continued to discourse in the same strain, and with a better flow of spirits than he was accustomed to enjoy. The result was that Eleanor's apprehensions gradually subsided, until they passed away altogether;—and, feeling convinced that her husband had *not* overheard anything which occurred between herself and the Duchess of Devonshire, she concluded that what she had fancied to be an ominous singularity of manner on his part was only the work of her own fevered imagination and guilty conscience.

For Eleanor *did* look upon the revelation which she had made to the Duchess and the thoughts to which she had yielded subsequently, as crimes which she had committed!

CHAPTER LIX.

THE COUNTESS AND THE MILLINER.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock on the following morning, Mrs. Brace, attended by a young person dressed in mourning, alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of the Earl of Desborough's mansion in Berkeley Square.

The young person just alluded to, carried a large band-box in her hand: for, being the junior assistant in Mrs. Brace's establishment, it was her duty to accompany her mistress on such occasions as the present. She however remained below in a species of waiting-room opening from the hall, while the milliner, taking the band-box, ascended to the bed-chamber of the Countess.

Eleanor, having passed a restless and feverish night, had not long risen from her couch. Dressed in a charming *déshabillé*, she was half-reclining in a capacious arm-chair near the fire, and playing with rather than partaking of the cup of chocolate which stood on a little table at her right hand.

Her raven hair was negligently gathered up into bands, the rich masses of which framed with ebony her spotless forehead: she was pale—and an appearance of languor was expressed on her countenance and pervaded her entire form.

The lady's-maid, having ushered in Mrs. Brace, immediately retired; and the milliner was left alone with the Countess.

"I had really forgotten my appointment with you, this morning," said the latter.

"If it will suit your ladyship better, I can easily call again," answered Mrs. Brace, in her most dulcet tones.

"No—I would not give you so much trouble, since

you have come on purpose," rejoined the Countess. "Have you brought the purple velvet dress——"

"I am invariably punctual in executing your ladyship's commands," observed the milliner.

As she thus spoke, she laid aside her bonnet and scarf and proceeded to open the band-box. First she took out several beautiful lace caps, which she carefully placed upon the bed; and then she drew forth a superb velvet dress, made in accordance with a fashion which she herself had artistically devised and which she hoped, through the aid of the brilliant Countess of Desborough, to bring into vogue.

Rising from her seat, and slowly divesting herself of the elegant morning wrapper which she wore, Eleanor proceeded to try on the new dress in front of a psyche, or full-length looking-glass, which reflected her fine figure on its polished surface. Indeed, as she thus stood for a few moments, with her exquisitely shaped shoulders, her beauteous neck, and her well-rounded arms completely bare,—with the closely fitting but not tightly-laced corset setting off her symmetry, and developing every contour,—and with her feet and ankles, up to the swell of the leg, appearing below the short petticoat, she seemed a perfect model of loveliness; and Mrs. Brace could not help thinking at the time that it was indeed no wonder if the Prince of Wales burnt so ardently to possess her.

The velvet robe was tried on—and it fitted admirably. The low body revealed half the bust—the arms were left bare almost to the very shoulders, where the miniature sleeves were looped up with rows of pearls—and from the waist the glossy skirt flowed in massive folds, shining with a lustrous richness where the light from the windows fell upon them, and deeply dark in the shades between.

"You are really a most accomplished *artiste* in your profession," said the Countess of Desborough, well pleased with the result of the experiment, and surveying herself in the glass not altogether without a feeling of vanity—for she saw that she was handsome—gloriously handsome; and the thought raised up a glow of pride to her cheeks so pale before.

"I thank your ladyship for the compliment," returned Mrs. Brace, whose full and largely rounded form presented a voluptuous contrast with the elegant, graceful, and dignified loveliness of the patrician. "Permit me to observe that this dress suits your ladyship admirably: it will undulate with every movement, and thereby become almost as expressive as gestures."

"Your art, then, has its mysteries as well as those which are acknowledged to be of a more complex nature," said the Countess of Desborough, with a smile.

"Your ladyship perhaps is unaware how much depends upon the dress," returned the milliner. "The most faultless shape may be rendered faulty thereby, and it should be made so as to accompany, as it were, each and every motion of the form, as if it were a part thereof. The great secrets of the art are to do justice to a fine figure, and improve a bad one."

"You should write a treatise upon the mysteries of that art, Mrs. Brace," said the Countess, smiling again at the information which her milliner was imparting.

"Pardon me, my lady," responded the latter; "but these are secrets which must not be published to the world in general. Oh! I can assure your ladyship that Mrs. Fitzherbert, her Grace of Devonshire, Lady Jersey, and many others of my most eminent patronesses often condescend to listen to me while I explain these things."

"Ah! you are employed by Mrs. Fitzherbert, Lady Jersey, and my dear friend the Duchess of Devonshire?" said the Countess in a musing tone—for it struck her as being singular that Mrs. Brace should have mentioned by name three ladies who were intimately connected with the Prince of Wales.

"Such is the fact, I can assure your ladyship," answered the milliner. "And perhaps your ladyship will excuse me for mentioning that his Royal Highness the heir-apparent never fancies any dress worn by Mrs. Fitzherbert, unless made at my establishment."

"Is his Royal Highness so excellent a connoisseur in respect to lady's attire?" asked Eleanor, as she laid aside her new velvet dress and, resuming her morning-wrapper, threw herself languidly back again into the large arm-chair—her pretty feet, imprisoned in elegant slippers, now resting on an ottoman.

"Since your ladyship puts the question to me," responded Mrs. Brace, thus ingeniously directing the discourse towards the topic on which she was anxious to touch,—"I will unhesitatingly inform you that his Royal Highness is not only an excellent judge in such matters, but that he volunteers his opinion on many points at those times when I have the honour to wait on Mrs. Fitzherbert in order to submit the latest fashions to her. Would your ladyship be offended if I were to confess that Mrs. Fitzherbert has seen your velvet robe, and highly approves of it?"

"Oh! certainly I cannot be offended on that account," exclaimed Eleanor. "But how did it happen?"

"I waited upon Mrs. Fitzherbert an hour ago to exhibit those beautiful caps," continued Mrs. Brace indicating the objects of her remark, and which she had carefully deposited upon the bed: "when I opened the band-box, she caught a glimpse of the velvet dress and insisted upon seeing it. I dared not refuse compliance with her demand—and she was enchanted. Indeed, to tell your ladyship the truth, I am to make her one according to the same fashion without delay. But, by the bye," added the milliner, with a frankness and candour so well assumed that the Countess was completely duped by the apparent artlessness of her manner,—"I should have observed that his Royal Highness was seated at breakfast with Mrs. Fitzherbert at the time—and that——But, no—I dare not say any more."

And Mrs. Brace pretended to be suddenly animated by a second thought which threw her into confusion.

"Oh! I cannot allow you to break off thus in the middle of your narrative," exclaimed Eleanor, whose curiosity was excited, she scarcely knew why—unless, indeed, it were by a presentiment that the Prince had mentioned her name in complimentary terms.

"If your ladyship's commands be that I should tell you everything which really occurred this morning at Chirlton House," said Mrs. Brace, "I cannot of course prove disobedient."

"Yes—let me hear it all," returned Eleanor, half-ashamed at thus indulging in what she could only look upon as the most frivolous gossip: and yet her heart palpitated all the while.

"Well, I will be explicit," continued Mrs. Brace

who was thus deliberately and coolly inventing a scene at Carlton House which had not taken place at all; for she had come direct from her own abode to Berkeley Square, and had not set eyes on Mrs. Fitzherbert for some weeks past. "The moment I produced your splendid velvet dress, Mrs. Fitzherbert was in raptures—and she insisted upon knowing whom it was for. I accordingly mentioned your ladyship's name; upon hearing which, his Royal Highness burst forth into such enthusiastic praises of your ladyship's beauty—figure—elegant gait—and fascinating manners, that——But I am really trembling from head to foot lest I should offend your ladyship?" exclaimed the artful milliner, appearing to be suddenly seized with renewed confusion and embarrassment.

"Nay—I am not so easily chagrined or hurt," exclaimed Eleanor, affecting to experience no other sentiment than that of amusement at this tittle-tattle—whereas her bosom was in reality heaving with inexpressible emotions. "Proceed, Mrs. Brace: you divert me much, I can assure you."

"I thank your ladyship for relieving me of the apprehension that I might give offence," resumed the wily milliner, who failed not to observe that the Countess was rapidly becoming more deeply interested in her narrative. "I was informing your ladyship that the Prince broke out into enthusiastic,—nay, I may almost add, rapturous eulogies on your ladyship's style of loveliness;—and he was continuing in this strain—evidently carried away by the impulse of his feelings—when Mrs. Fitzherbert interrupted him sharply. For, I do not mind telling your ladyship,—since we *have* entered upon the subject,—that his Royal Highness *did* say enough—and far more than enough to provoke Mrs. Fitzherbert's jealousy. In fact, as I have already had the honour of informing your ladyship, nothing could equal his enthusiasm."

"And what did Mrs. Fitzherbert say?" inquired Eleanor, her cheeks glowing as she recalled to mind the impassioned kisses that the heir-apparent had imprinted on her lips when he held her in his arms on that memorable afternoon the particulars of which had never escaped her memory.

"Mrs. Fitzherbert exclaimed, '*Everybody knows that Lady Desborough is one of the handsomest women in England: but you need not dwell upon her charms, for all that!*'—To which the Prince replied, '*There is no harm in admiring a beautiful creature like the Countess: indeed, a man must possess a heart of stone who cannot worship female loveliness wherever it exists.*'—These were the principal observations that passed," added the designing Mrs. Brace; "and now your ladyship has compelled me to reveal everything."

"And are you sure that there is no exaggeration in your narrative?" exclaimed Eleanor, affecting to laugh, while in reality she was deeply moved—and had the Prince been with her at that moment, and none else present, his Royal Highness would not perhaps have been repulsed as on the former occasion.

"I can assure your ladyship that I have not coloured my tale in the least," said Mrs. Brace. "By the bye, I am to return again to Carlton House in the afternoon, with the patterns of the velvet for Mrs. Fitzherbert's dress."

"Well—but what induced you to tell me that you were to return thither?" inquired the Countess of Desborough.

"Oh! nothing my lady!" ejaculated the milliner. "Only I was thinking how annoyed Mrs. Fitzherbert would be, if—just for the sake of a little mischief—I were to tell his Royal Highness in her presence that I had communicated to your ladyship all the particulars which occurred ere now at Carlton House."

"You cannot dream of such a thing!" ejaculated Eleanor, her pride suddenly prevailing over the tender and voluptuous thoughts which had been excited in her bosom. "Not for worlds would I have you be guilty of such an imprudence! Indeed, I perceive that I was wrong to indulge in this idle gossip, Mrs. Brace," she added haughtily.

"Pray forgive me for the indiscretion which I have perpetrated!" cried the milliner, appearing to be quite grieved at this sudden change in the manner of her patroness: and, in fact, she saw that she had gone a little too far. "No, my lady—I am incapable of such conduct, I can assure you. At the same time, it must be as galling to Mrs. Fitzherbert to know that the Prince is desperately in love with your ladyship, as it is complimentary to you."

"You do not mean to imply that the few flattering phrases which his Royal Highness condescended to utter concerning me, denote anything of so serious a nature on his part?" said Eleanor, with a softened tone and manner.

"If I were to explain my real sentiments to your ladyship, you would only upbraid me again," observed the milliner, affecting to be busied in putting on her bonnet and scarf preparatory to taking her departure.

"No—I promise to be less hasty with you, my good Mrs. Brace," said the Countess. "Speak frankly and candidly: for although it be but idle gossip—the mere pastime of chit-chat——"

"Precisely so, my lady," said the milliner. "You have given me permission to explain my real sentiments? Well—I will tell you honestly and sincerely, then, how I read the feelings of his Royal Highness. He loves—he adores—he worships you!"

"Mrs. Brace, this is language which I dare not listen to!" exclaimed Eleanor, the crimson tide flooding her cheeks—her neck—her very bosom.

"Did I not say that your ladyship would only scold me?" cried the milliner, affecting to be plunged into the most painful bewilderment. "What am I to do? Your ladyship condescends to listen to me—commands me to speak frankly—and then covers me with your displeasure."

"I was wrong, my good creature," said the Countess of Desborough: "for I admit that I gave you encouragement to make this extraordinary and most unexpected revelation. But how can you possibly be so foolish as to construe into a serious sentiment the few idle compliments which the Prince was pleased to utter concerning me?"

"Ah! my lady," returned Mrs. Brace, "if you had studied human nature as profoundly as I have done, your ladyship would not be so sceptical. There is a wide and essential difference between mere passing flattery and those enthusiastic praises which come from the heart. Think you, my lady, that the Prince, in a moment of perfect good temper, would wantonly provoke a quarrel with Mrs. Fitzherbert by exciting her jealousy? Assuredly not. The truth is, that he was carried away by his feelings—he was borne along by the tide of rapturous emotions—and the words he uttered flowed irresistibly from his heart

Had his life depended on the issue, he could not have stayed that passionate ebullition of glowing praises. The spell of your ladyship's beauty gave an impulse to his language, which rendered him magnificently eloquent: and, Oh! how handsome and god-like did he appear when thus breathing forth the evidences of a love—an ardent love—the existence of which he could not conceal even though in the presence of Mrs. Fitzherbert! His soul, speaking through his eyes as intelligibly as by his tongue, was one flame of passion. His cheeks mantled and his heart throbbed, as if the incantation of your witching beauty was upon him. Oh! I could read all that was passing in his mind—in his heart—in the profundities of his soul:—and I pitied him!"

"You pitied him!" said Eleanor, in a languid and tremulous tone, as a thousand agitating thoughts and tender feelings swept through her.

"Pardon me for making the observation, my lady," returned the milliner, throwing some emotion into her own voice; "but I must frankly confess that I *did* pity him then—*do* pity him now!"

"Then he loves me!" murmured Eleanor, leaning her head upon her hand and falling into a deep reverie, which lasted several minutes: at length, raising her eyes, and starting at beholding Mrs. Brace whose presence she had forgotten during that interval of profound meditation, she said, "You must think me very vain—very silly—very foolish to have listened with so much apparent attention to all you have been telling me: but it has served to while away an hour," she added, glancing at the time-piece upon the mantel;—"and I thank you for your kind endeavours to amuse me."

"I hope your ladyship does not imagine that I have uttered a single word which is not literally true, or in which I do not conscientiously believe," said Mrs. Brace.

"No—I give you credit for sincerity," responded Eleanor: then, her pride again coming to her aid, she observed in a tone which denoted her desire that the conversation should end, "You may leave two of the morning-caps—those which you think will become me best."

Mrs. Brace was too discreet not to take the hint thus conveyed: she accordingly made her curtsey and withdrew.

But as the crafty and designing milliner descended the stairs, she chuckled inwardly at the effect which she saw had been produced by her specious language on the mind of the Countess of Desborough; and she said to herself, "That proud patrician lady will ere long surrender the fortalice of her charms to the Prince!"

On entering the waiting-room adjoining the hall, the milliner found the young lady in deep mourning whom she had left there, conversing with a tall, thin, pale, but very handsome and interesting young man, dressed in a neat though homely garb.

"Now, Miss Morton, my dear," said Mrs. Brace: "we will return home"

"I am at your service, madam," answered the beautiful girl; and, with a gentle inclination of the head towards the young man, she followed her mistress from the room.

When they were in the hackney-coach together, the milliner said, "Who was that person you were talking to, Camilla?"

"He is a stranger to me, madam," was the prompt and ingenuous reply. "Indeed, he had not been in the apartment many minutes ere you came. Some civil remark which he made rendered it necessary for me to give him an equally courteous answer: but if you are offended with me, madam, for speaking to one totally unknown to me, I can assure you that I gave him no encouragement to address me."

"My dear Camilla," said Mrs. Brace, in her kindest tone, "I am not in the least vexed with you. I know that you are a good girl and will follow my advice in all things; and that is sufficient. Indeed, I have promised to become a mother to you—and I will keep my word."

"Oh! my dear madam, how grateful am I to you for this assurance!" exclaimed the young girl who was as beautiful as the sweet Christian name to which she answered, and who now appeared deeply—deeply interesting as her eyes flashed looks of gratitude through her tears, as if they were lighted up with twin-drops of the diamond dew.

"Come, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace; "wipe away all traces of weeping—for you have a little commission to execute for me at this house where the coach is about to stop."

And as the milliner uttered these words, the vehicle, in pursuance of the directions which she had already given to the driver, drew up at the front door of a splendid mansion in Piccadilly.

"I am anxious that this note," said Mrs. Brace, handing Camilla a neatly folded billet, "should be delivered to Lord Florimel—and to him only. It must not be conveyed through a servant—and I do not wish to deliver it myself. The truth is, my love," added the milliner, in a hasty and confidential whisper, "it is a little money-matter—a debt which one of his lordship's lady-cousins owes me—and I know that all my previous applications for payment have been intercepted, when addressed to him. He will settle his extravagant relative's liability, if we can manage that the note shall only reach him."

"I understand you, madam," said the artless, innocent, and unsuspecting Camilla, perfectly satisfied with this explanation, every word of which was of course false: "you desire me to solicit an interview with his lordship, and place the note in his hands."

"That is exactly what I mean, my love," responded Mrs. Brace, with bland tone and caressing manner.

The beautiful girl, anxious to testify her readiness to oblige a mistress who promised to be a mother to her, descended from the vehicle; and, the front door of the mansion being by this time open in obedience to the summons given by the coachman, she inquired of the powdered and lace-bedizened lacquey whether Lord Florimel was at home. An answer was returned in the affirmative; and she was conducted into a small but elegantly-furnished parlour, where the young nobleman, in a morning-garb, was lounging in an arm-chair close by the blazing fire, perusing a novel.

The instant that Camilla made her appearance, he was struck by the beauty of her person, the modesty of her demeanour, and the sylph-like symmetry of her form. Advancing bashfully—almost timidly—towards him, she presented the note, observing in a soft and silver tone, "Mrs. Brace sends this, my lord, with her respectful compliments."

Florimel instantly comprehended, by the fact of the fair creature being in mourning, that she was the

same young person of whom Miss Bruce had spoken to him on that morning when she received him in her bed-chamber, and when he so meanly surrendered to the attractions of her matured and voluptuous charms. Casting upon Miss Morton another look of deep and tender interest, Florimel opened the note, which contained only these words:—

"What think you, my dear friend, of the banter of this? You are a naughty man for not coming to see me. Pray explain this absence of several days—not by letter, but in person. I shall expect you to sup with me on any evening you may choose to appoint; and if it be agreeable to you, I can promise that the bonne, Miss Camilla Morton, shall be of the party. All your wants now sup to her in that you will attend to the note."

For a moment a cloud passed over Lord Florimel's countenance, as the thought swept across his imagination that Mrs. Bruce was determined to throw temptation in his way and seduce him from the allegiance and fidelity which he had sworn to the lovely Pauline: but when he again fixed his eyes upon the charming girl who stood bashfully waiting his answer to the billet, he had not the moral courage to deliver an unfavourable response. He accordingly said, "Tell your kind mistress, that I will give my early attention to her letter."

Camilla thanked his lordship and retired, followed by the looks of the young and noble voluptuary, who was enraptured by the elegance of the retreating figure which his eyes thus devoured, and ravished by the glimpse which he caught of a foot and ankle of the most enchanting shape.

But just at the moment when Miss Morton was descending the steps of the front-door, two young ladies—beautifully dressed, extremely handsome, and evidently sisters—who happened to be passing, stopped short; and one of them, exclaiming to the other, "That is Gabriel's house!" fixed a searching look upon Camilla.

The young girl, though utterly unconscious of having done anything wrong, nevertheless blushed up to the very forehead on finding herself the object of this unaccountable scrutiny;—and the lady from whose lips the ejaculation had burst and who was thus intently regarding her, said in a somewhat imperious tone, "I presume, Miss, that you have been to see Lord Florimel?"

Camilla was so confused that she could make no reply; and the blush upon her cheeks deepened into the liveliest crimson.

"Oh! I comprehend it all!" exclaimed the young lady, drawing herself up with a superb dignity, while the glow of wounded pride flushed her magnificent countenance: then turning to her sister, she said, "Come, Octavia—let us continue our walk."

And as the two ladies passed on together, Camilla hurried into the vehicle, whence Mrs. Bruce had observed all that had just occurred.

The hackney-coach proceeded towards Pall Mall; and the milliner, after receiving the message which Lord Florimel had sent her, and at which she was secretly delighted, said, "These two ladies behaved very rudely to you, my love: but it was evidently some misapprehension on their part."

"I am afraid that I did wrong in venturing alone into the presence of that nobleman," observed Miss Morton, the tears streaming down her cheeks, as she smarted under the indignity which she had experienced at the hands of the two ladies. "What could they mean?—why did they regard me so intently?—what did they take me for?"

"Tranquillise yourself, my dear child," said Mrs. Bruce, never at a loss for expedients to explain away a difficulty, and by no means desirous that Camilla should be shocked by the late proceeding, whose unpleasant suspicions might be engendered in the mind of the artless girl: "I can satisfy you on every point. Those two young ladies were his lordship's cousins—and the youngest, who insulted you, is the one owing me the money. Catching a glimpse of my face in the coach, she suspected your errand; and that was the reason of her insolent conduct."

Camilla was immediately relieved by this explanation, composed of a tissue of falsehoods though it were: for the milliner had perfectly well recognised the daughters of Mr. Clarendon, and had taken very good care that Octavia should not see her.

The hackney-coach drove rapidly on towards Pall Mall, Mrs. Bruce having no more visits to make nor commissions for Miss Morton to execute on the present occasion.

CHAPTER LX.

THE SURGEON

Our readers will not have forgotten a certain Mr. Thurston, who figured in the opening chapters of our narrative. This medical gentleman, having not only accumulated money by unwearied application to his business and by habits of the strictest parsimony, but having also received the munificent sum of ten thousand pounds as a recompense for taking charge of the Princess Sophia's child, removed from the Edgeware Road into the fashionable district of May Fair.

The house which he thus took was large and of handsome appearance: it stood at the corner of a long paved alley, forming the entrance to a mews, and whence a door communicated with the yard at the back of his premises. The interior of the dwelling he furnished in a costly style, well knowing how much the world is in the habit of judging a medical man's talents by his pecuniary prosperity and the style in which he lives. In this instance, therefore, neither Mr. Thurston nor his niggard wife spared their gold in embellishing their new abode: for it was a matter of calculation that the more they thus laid out, the greater would become the professional practice and the larger the returns of revenue.

The infant, who had been entrusted to the care of these people, and whom they had adopted as their own son under the name of Godfrey Thurston, throve admirably. The greatest attention was bestowed upon the child—and the surgeon's wife soon learnt to love it, while her husband, who was a shrewd and far-seeing man, often thought within himself that the existence of this proof of some high-born lady's frailty would some day or another yield him a richer harvest than even the ten thousand pounds which he had already reaped.

It was only on the very morning of those incidents which we have detailed in the preceding chapter, that the brass plate, with Mr. Thurston's name and profession engraved thereon, had been duly fixed upon the front-door of the new house in May Fair.

In the afternoon, a tall handsome-looking gentleman, enveloped in a cloak lined with sables, was walking, not exactly in a leisurely, but rather in an abstracted and mournful mood, along the street, —when he suddenly caught sight of the brass-plate. The neighbourhood was so familiar to him, that he was instantly aware of this being a new professional arrival in the district: besides, the exterior of the house had just been repaired and improved, and he also remembered that it was for some time to let until within a week or two past; so that all doubt was removed from his mind as to Mr. Thurston being a very recent settler in that fashionable colony.

Struck by some idea, which rapidly gained an influence upon him, he fixed his eyes for a few moments on the brass-plate—then walked on a few paces—then looked back again at the surgeon's abode—and then pursued his way, but with every evidence of indecision and hesitation in his manner. He was wrestling with the thought that had flashed to his mind, and which prompted him on the one hand to adopt a course whence shame and a deep sense of humiliation deterred him on the other.

At length, before he had gained the end of the street, he turned with the decision of a man who has abruptly resolved on taking a particular step, although a disagreeable one;—and, retracing his path to the surgeon's house, he knocked at the door.

A domestic in a handsome livery immediately answered the summons, and inquired the visitor's name so that he might learn whether he were a friend of the family or a patient, and might show him into the drawing-room or the surgery-parlour accordingly.

"I wish to consult your master professionally," was the reply, but unaccompanied with the announcement of any name.

The domestic led the way through a fine marble hall, to a carpetted passage communicating with the surgery-parlour, which joined the surgery itself, both being at the back part of the house. The parlour was a small but elegantly furnished room, having double doors alike at the entrance from the passage, and also on the side opening into the surgery—so that nothing which transpired within those four walls could be heard without. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate; and Mr. Thurston rose from a table where he had been engaged in writing, when the visitor was conducted into his presence.

"Your name, sir?" said Mr. Thurston, preparing to inscribe in a new book the appellation of his first patient at the new abode.

"It were a ridiculous affectation to conceal it," was the answer; "because I live at no very great distance, and because my rank would be certain to render you acquainted with my person in a short time. Nevertheless, it is in the strictest confidence, and relying on your honour, that I have come to consult you upon an important—an afflicting—a most delicate matter. I am the Earl of Desborough."

Mr. Thurston wrote down the name in his book and then said, "Your lordship may trust me. I have no interest in betraying the confidence thus reposed in me—but every possible reason to sustain it. Your lordship may likewise speak fearlessly: not a word uttered in this room can be heard without."

"I perceive that you have only recently settled in this neighbourhood," observed the nobleman; "and the recommendations of an influential friend may not prove a mere auxiliary to your own professional abilities. Those recommendations shall you have from me—that friend will I become."

"I most sincerely thank your lordship," said Mr. Thurston: "but even without these kind—these generous promises, I should not the less be faithful to any confidence which you may repose in me."

"Lady Desborough and myself have our regular family physician," continued the Earl: "but it happens that our surgeon has lately quitted the metropolis. Under these circumstances, therefore, you shall henceforth supply his place. Do not however think, Mr. Thurston," he added emphatically, "that I am saying all this merely with a view to bind you to my interests or appeal to a vulgar mercenary feeling. Such is not my intention: I am incapable of thus insulting you. But I wish you to understand that I have resolved to consult you in a certain matter—to entrust you with my sad secret—and to place the utmost reliance upon you, because we have hitherto been total strangers to each other—because you come into a new neighbourhood where some trifling amount of patronage may be useful—and because——"

"Because you believe that under any circumstances, I am more likely to keep your lordship's secret than an established practitioner who wastes half his time in idle chit-chat with those families at whose houses he is on an intimate footing. This is your lordship's view," added Mr. Thurston, in a decisive tone;—"and it is a correct one. I am not offended—I thank your lordship for that promise of patronage which I cordially accept—and every way will I prove myself worthy of your lordship's favour and countenance."

"I am glad that you have put the matter thus frankly upon its proper basis," said the Earl: then drawing forth from his purse a bank-note for five hundred pounds, he added, "This is your retaining fee."

Mr. Thurston bowed his thanks, and placed himself in an attitude of deep attention.

"I must inform you, sir" resumed the Earl, his manner suddenly becoming painfully embarrassed, "that I approach with the deepest humiliation—with the acutest sense of shame—the subject of my visit. Married for some years to a lady of extraordinary beauty and of the sternest virtue, but whose temperament is naturally of an ardent, glowing, and impassionate nature—I——But just heaven! how can I induce my tongue to frame the confession——"

And, suddenly starting from the seat which he had taken on entering the room, the Earl began to pace to and fro in the wildest agitation.

Mr. Thurston said nothing: he was not intimate enough with the nobleman to venture upon words of consolation, although he more than half suspected the nature of the secret which was about to be revealed to him.

Suddenly checking his frantic walk up and down the surgery-parlour, the Earl laid his right hand heavily upon the surgeon's shoulder—and bending his head until his lips nearly touched Thurston's ears, he said in a thick, hoarse, and low voice, "Five thousand pounds are yours if you can give

me any hope: for I—wretch that I am—Oh! do not look up at me as I speak——I am——"

And the remaining word, which proclaimed the fatal secret and confirmed the medical man's previous suspicion, was conveyed in the lowest audible whisper.

"Now you are acquainted with my misery—and my heart is already easier," said the nobleman, flinging himself once more on the seat which he had ere now quitted.

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"Then there is no hope, Mr. Thurston?" said the Earl, after a long private conference; and he spoke in a voice which betrayed how deeply he was moved.

"None, my lord," was the emphatic answer. "It would be downright robbery to take a shilling from you for such a purpose. Besides, your lordship has already remunerated me far too handsomely."

"Say not a word upon that subject," returned the nobleman. "My secret——"

"Is the same as if it had never been confided to me," rejoined Mr. Thurston.

"I thank you—sincerely thank you," said the Earl;—and pressing the surgeon's hand with convulsive violence, the unfortunate nobleman took his departure.

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It was about nine o'clock in the evening, and Mr. Thurston was alone in the surgery, having purposely dismissed his assistant, although there were several medicines to compound and send out—for the first day of the professional gentleman's career at the West End, had been a busy and a lucrative one.

The surgery had three doors: one communicated with the parlour where he had received the Earl of Desborough, and which was intended for the reception of persons calling to consult him: the second opened into the yard at the back of the building;—and the third communicated with an apartment of which we shall have to speak more in a future chapter. But these details, trivial as they may now appear, must be borne in mind.

Presently a bell in the surgery rang.

Mr. Thurston opened the door leading into the yard—and, passing out, he unfastened the gate communicating with the stables before alluded to.

A man immediately entered the premises, and Thurston conducted him, without saying a word, into the surgery, closing the door carefully behind him.

The individual whom he had thus admitted into his *sanctum*, was a short, strong-built, ill-looking fellow, with a repulsive countenance, and a sinister leer in the small reptile-like eyes which did one harm to meet their gaze. He was clothed in a coarse, rough, and negligent manner—but not through poverty: for the villain's ill-gotten gains were sufficient in the course of a month to keep an entire family in a respectable style for a whole year.

This man was Miles the Buzgloak.

"Well, sir," he said, as soon as the surgeon had closed the door, "you see I'm punctiwal to the appintment which you was kind enow to give me. So you've got into your new house—eh? Well, I only hope your business will increase accordingly—and then I shall have all the more of your paytronage."

"I did not send for you here to bestow your conversation upon me," exclaimed Mr. Thurston, sharply. "You are well aware what I require can you manage it for me soon and secretly?"

"As for secrecy," responded Miles, "your honour knows that it's the wery fust principle of our business: and as for doing it soon, I can promise the thing for next Monday night, and no mistake whatsoever."

"Ah! next Monday night!" ejaculated the surgeon, a thought striking him. "Yes—I remember—it was said in this morning's paper that next Monday is the day fixed——But you mean me to have one of *them*, eh?"

"You can't have a better, sir," responded the man. "The young 'un will suit your book to a nicety."

"Well—be it so. And if any obstacle should arise in that quarter——"

"Then I must get you another—that's all!" answered the Buzgloak. "But it ain't likely: so if you'll be prepared next Monday night to receive me and my partner Dick the Tramper, who's as fine a fellow as any under the sun—'specially at this here sort of work——"

"I have no doubt of his merits whatsoever," interrupted Mr. Thurston, laconically. "At midnight—as near that hour as possible—I shall expect you. At all events, I shall remain in the surgery until you ring the bell of the gate opening from the mews. If you do not come by two in the morning, I shall conclude it is a failure in that quarter——"

"Make your mind easy, sir," exclaimed the Buzgloak, with a significant leer. "At twelve o'clock, or thereabouts, you'll hear the bell a-tinkling, sure enow. And having got so far, we'll just settle about the price—and then I'll take my walyable carcase off—'cos I've got another appintment on some business for this evening."

"Name your own terms—and I can easily say whether I agree to them, or not," observed the medical gentleman.

"Well—forty shiners won't hurt you," said Miles, fixing his serpent eyes upon Thurston to see how the price named was relished.

"No—'tis ten too much," was the answer.

"Come—we'll split the difference, and have no more bother about it," exclaimed the Buzgloak. "Thirty-five—cash on delivery—them's the terms; and on any others Mr. Miles respectfully declines doing business, as the ready-money tradesmen puts on their circulars."

"Be it so," said the surgeon. "At twelve, then, next Monday night, I shall expect you."

"There or thereabouts," responded the Buzgloak. "I know you'll be well satisfied with the result; and the bargain is entirely your'n. It's as cheap as dirt, considering the risk's transportation for life. But poor men like me must live any how——"

"And I don't suppose you are very particular in what way it is," interrupted the medical man suffering his countenance to relax into a smile. 'But we have settled everything—and——"

"And I'll bundle," added Miles.

The man accordingly took his departure, Mr Thurston conducting him out by the back door.

On leaving the abode of the medical gentleman, Miles the Buzgloak proceeded rapidly towards Westminster; and, passing round the Abbey cemetery, he struck into the maze of vile and crowded streets lying in the immediate vicinity of that venerable pile. In spite of the frosty chill of the weather, half-naked women were seen standing at the open doors of the wretched houses,—the light from the windows flickering dimly upon their persons, and revealing countenances either bloated or emaciated with dissipation: while their language, as they discoursed across the thoroughfares with each other, bore terrible and unequivocal evidence to their utter depravity and boundless prodigacy.

From many of the dwellings came the noise of uproarious revelry and the boisterous sounds of drunken orgies,—mingled with the shrieks of some unfortunate female whom a paramour was treating with ruffian brutality, and the shrill voice of some querulous wife responding in bitter taunts to the coarse and gruff upbraidings of a worthless husband. Around the doors of the low public-houses were congregated loathsome wretches in female shape, chattering or disputing in loud tones — insulting any respectable person who might chance to pass that way—and making the whole neighbourhood ring with their vociferations of delight, when some flash fellow or fancy man accosted them with an offer to stand treat for gin. Now and then a poor mechanic out of work, and whom dire penury had forced to take up his abode in that horrible district, would creep shivering and miserable along the street to the house in which he occupied a wretched attic, and where he knew that a wife was giving a withered breast to a poor frail infant, and where starving children were crying piteously for the bread which he had not succeeded in obtaining throughout a long day's anxious and heart-breaking quest for honest employment. Now and then, too, some scantily clad and emaciated woman would

drag herself along through that morass of human reptiles, back to the cold and naked lodging where she had left a loved husband lying sick on a bundle of rags or a heap of straw, and famished little ones huddling together to keep themselves warm, while the poor father endeavoured to cheer his wretched offspring with the hope that their mother would be sure to bring them bread — a hope which in a few minutes was to experience so dire a disappointment!

For, oh! honest poverty and unblushing vice are always to be found in the same districts—always inhabit the same neighbourhoods: because a bad reputation cheapens lodgings in those quarters, and the upright poor are driven by an imperious and stern necessity to seek the advantages which inveterate demoralization has thus procured. And it is in this manner that the honest poverty ends by being drawn into the vortex of corruption and absorbed in the mass of profligacy and crime: it is thus that the poor artizan is led to steal sooner than behold his children starve;—it is thus that his wife is drawn into the loathsome circle whose centre is the gin-shop, where she imbibes the fire-water that drowns her cares and her better feelings at one and the same time;—it is thus, too, that the fair young daughter of these lost parents goes forth into the street to stretch out her hand to implore alms, as if she were holding it out to God, — when it is caught by some licentious rake or hoary voluptuary, who drops gold into the palm that only hoped to feel the touch of pence—and then another virtuous soul is lost, and another member added to the eighty thousand daughters of crime who crowd the finest thoroughfares and the most wretched alleys in the richest city of the universe!

But all this time, away rolls the portly Bishop in his splendid equipage, dreaming of his thirty thousand a-year and the fat livings which he has in his gift;—away flies the superb carriage containing the peer whose enormous income is made up of the flesh and blood of hundreds of starving labourers upon his vast estates;—away goes the chariot, in which patrician beauty lolls so languishingly, not thinking that the poor girl who made the satin dress that she wears, was with the same needle and thread sewing her own winding-sheet;—away passes the sumptuous barouche, bearing to some banquet the wealthy manufacturer who has just been voting in the House of Commons some measure calculated to rivet the iron oppression which already goads his slaves to desperation: away glides the brilliant equipage, on the downy cushion of which slumbers in a dreamy listlessness the coal-mine owner of countless riches, all produced by a sweat as agonising as that which streamed from the Saviour's pores on the Mount of Olives!—away flies the state coach of Royalty to the Opera which fills the pockets of foreigners with gold, while the votaries of the national drama are pining in debtors' prisons or preparing to visit the Bankruptcy Court on the morrow;—away, away they all go—those magnificent equipages, with their splendid steeds, and their glancing lamps, and their pampered menials,—away, away, spurning that ground to which the poor are crushed, and throwing up clouds of that dust which the famished slaves of toil are compelled to lick!

But to return to our tale.

Miles the Buzgloak pursued his path amidst the pestilential streets which lie behind the Abbey; and at length he entered a low public-house, or flash ken, known by the sign of the Jolly Prize-fighters. Nodding familiarly to the landlord as he passed the bar, he entered the tap-room, in which there was only one person seated at the moment he crossed the threshold.

That person was Dick the Tramper,—a tall, athletic, stoutly-built man, with a shock of fiery red hair, a large round face to match, and bushy whiskers of the same hue.

"Well, Miles—is it all right?" demanded this individual, as his friend threw himself on the same bench near the fire.

"All right," responded the Buzgloak. "The saw-bones Thurston will give thirty-five shiners—and I closed with him."

"That's just what we said we should get by asking forty," observed the Tramper. "Well, I han't been idle either," he continued, in the husky voice that was habitual with him. "I've taken a complete survey of the premises I spoke to you about; and it's easy enow to get in by the area; for it's the only house in the square that hasn't got bars at the kitchen winder."

"So far, so good," said Miles. "But what about Jee Warren?"

"Oh! he'll jine in with us," answered Dick the Tramper. "He says he's quite sick of laying hid down yonder; and he'll make one in the affair, if it's only to keep his self in practice. He'll meet us at a certain part of the square which we've agreed upon at half-past twelve precise."

"That's good again!" cried the Buzgloak. "I'm glad the Magsman's in it: nothink never fails that he undertakes. But where's the tools?"

"Jemmy—centre-bit—wrench—skeleton-keys—and pistols, all stowed away safe," responded the Tramper, clapping his hands upon the capacious pockets of his rough coat.

"All right," said Miles, with an approving nod of the head. "Well, we'll start ten minutes arter midnight, eh?—and in the meantime we've got half-an-hour to smoke a clay and drink a pot or so."

"With all my heart," returned the Tramper.

And the two villains set to work to enjoy themselves accordingly.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE ROYAL GUEST.

We must now return to the Earl of Desborough, whom we left at the moment when he quitted Mr. Thurston's house in May Fair.

Summoning all his fortitude to his aid, after the crushing assurance which he had received to the effect that his last and only hope was fruitless, the nobleman returned home — shut himself up in his private apartment—and gave way to a long and painful meditation.

We cannot possibly endeavour to penetrate his thoughts: but that they were of the most harrowing description, might be inferred from his occasional outbursts of passionate grief—the superhuman efforts he made to subdue the fearful excitement which thus maddened him at intervals—the anguish with which he from time to time dashed his hands

against his high and noble forehead—the despair to which he abandoned himself—and the frequency with which he exclaimed aloud, "Yes—either suicide or that *other* dread alternative! My God! my God! have compassion on me!"

Once he seated himself at his desk and commenced a long letter which he addressed to his wife, and in which he explained the motives that led him to resolve upon self-destruction. While thus engaged, he experienced an unnatural calmness—a numbing almost to that joy which animates the desperate man who has resolved upon escaping from the miseries of life by the avenue of suicide;—and a smile of satisfaction stole over his countenance, as he folded, sealed, and directed the letter. Then he rose from his seat—took his pistols from the case—charged and primed them.

Yes—he had resolved upon self-destruction!

But even at the very instant when he was about to place the muzzle of one of the fatal weapons in his mouth, the idea flashed to his mind that he would dishonour his name, and by reflection dishonour his wife also, were he to accomplish his terrible purpose: for no one would believe that insanity had driven him to the consummation of such a deed. And that first idea engendered a thousand others, which swept through his brain in ghastly and appalling array;—the Coroner's inquest—the probability that the Countess might in the first moment of her terror, exhibit his letter to some friend, or faint on reading it, and thus afford others an opportunity of reading it also—the chance that Thurston might come forward, as a matter of public duty, to bear evidence respecting the real facts which had prompted the suicidal deed—then the verdict of *felo de se*—the denial of Christian prayers—the disgrace which would survive him, and which would in a measure cling to his widow, especially if the fatal cause of his suicide should transpire;—all these reflections passed through his mind with the rapidity of a hurricane.

Shuddering at the idea of self-destruction which he had dared to harbour, and which for a short space he had contemplated so calmly,—shocked to the very soul at the madness to which he had yielded,—the wretched Earl restored his pistols to their case, and threw into the fire the letter which he had addressed to his wife.

Then, somewhat relieved, he again paced the room;—and at last he ejaculated in accents of despair, "Yes—it must be that *other* alternative! There is no help for it—— My God! my God!"

Having thus made up his mind to the adoption of a certain plan which, though cruelly revolting and abhorrent to his mind, was, notwithstanding, far less terrible than the idea of suicide, the Earl of Desborough composed his countenance—arranged his dress—ordered his carriage—and repaired direct to Carlton House.

It was about three in the afternoon when the nobleman reached the princely dwelling; and he was immediately ushered into the presence of his Royal Highness, who happened to be alone and disengaged at the time.

At first the heir-apparent was somewhat confused when the Earl's name was announced: for he knew that Mrs. Bruce was to have seen the Countess in the morning,—and it instantly struck him that she might have managed her business so clumsily as to compromise himself—and that her ladyship had complained to her husband, who was now come to demand explanations of the indignity offered to his wife. But the affable tone and the manner of dignified respect with which Lord Desborough accosted the Prince, speedily dissipated those apprehensions; and his Royal Highness received the noble visitor with a cordiality enhanced by the relief that his feelings had just experienced.

After the usual compliments had been exchanged and a few observations passed on the leading topics of the day, the Earl of Desborough, drawing his chair closer to that on which the heir apparent was lounging, said in a subdued and serious tone, "I am about to take an exceeding liberty with your Royal Highness: but I humbly hope that my motives will be rightly understood. Have I permission to explain myself further?"

"Most assuredly, my esteemed friend," exclaimed the Prince, wondering to what point this mysterious preface was to lead, but confident that it had no connexion with the designs which he had formed and the intrigues he had set on foot in regard to the beautiful Countess. "You cannot, I am well aware, have anything in view which is inconsistent with my interests; for your lordship invariably votes on the right side," added the Prince of Wales, who, be it recollected, patronised the Whig party, to which the Earl belonged.

"I thank your Royal Highness for this gracious permission to explain myself," said the nobleman; "and I shall proceed frankly and candidly to state the object of my visit. The indelicate publicity which the Pitt Cabinet has given to the pecuniary affairs of your Royal Highness, has both grieved and incensed me. It nevertheless ceases to be a mere rumour or surmise that your Royal Highness is somewhat annoyed by certain liabilities at the present moment; and as some weeks must elapse ere the House of Commons can possibly come to a vote upon the propositions submitted to it the other day in respect to those embarrassments, I have ventured to seek this interview with your Royal Highness for the purpose of stating that I have at the moment a surplus of twenty thousand pounds in my bankers' hands. If your Royal Highness will condescend to take charge of that amount till the end of the year——"

"My dear friend," interrupted the Prince, his countenance lighting up with joy, as he seized the Earl's hands and wrung them both with cordial warmth;—"I appreciate all the generosity and delicacy of this proceeding on your part; and I accept with unfeigned gratitude the noble offer which you have made me."

"In that case," said the Earl, "if your Royal Highness would condescend to accept such poor hospitality as I may be enabled this evening to offer——"

"Again I express my thanks," interrupted the Prince, delighted at the prospect of a twofold pleasure: namely, of touching twenty thousand pounds on the one hand, and of passing a few hours in company with the charming Eleanor on the other. "If it be agreeable to your lordship and your amiable Countess, I will take dinner with you this evening. But pray let us enjoy a friendly privacy——"

"It is precisely this that I intended to propose," said the Earl. "Her ladyship will feel honoured by the presence of your Royal Highness," he added, his voice becoming slightly tremulous and the colour deepening somewhat on his cheeks: but recovering

his composure so speedily that his transient emotion was not observed by the Prince, he added, "At eight o'clock we shall expect your Royal Highness."

"I shall be punctual," responded the heir-apparent;—and the Earl took his leave, in order to visit his bankers.

It was about half-past four in the afternoon when the nobleman returned to his mansion in Berkeley Square; and, having ascertained that the Countess was alone in the drawing-room which she usually occupied in the winter season, he proceeded straight to that apartment.

"My dearest Eleanor," he said, rendering his voice as kind and his manner as cordial as he possibly could, "I have had occasion to call just now upon his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales ——"

Lady Desborough started; and it was only by a strong effort that she suppressed the ejaculation which rose to her lips.

"And his Royal Highness," continued the Earl, who at the instant let his handkerchief fall and stooped to pick it up—so that Eleanor was relieved by the certainty that her emotion had escaped his observation,—"and his Royal Highness will condescend to dine with us this evening. He has a little business to transact with me, of a pecuniary nature; and therefore his visit is strictly private—and he wishes to be alone with us, quite in a friendly way. The business to which I have alluded, will not occupy many minutes and can be transacted when we are over our wine together. I hope that the arrangement thus made will not interfere with any engagement previously made by you."

"I had no engagement for this evening," answered the Countess, now more than ever convinced that her husband was altogether ignorant of what had passed between herself and the Duchess of Devonshire on the preceding day, and that he was likewise unaware of the feeling which the Prince entertained towards her: or else, she was assured, he would not have invited his Royal Highness to the house.

"I need scarcely ask you to give such instructions, Eleanor," resumed the Earl, "that the entertainment may be worthy of the illustrious guest who is to honour us with his presence: nor is it needful for me to intimate my desire that, although the banquet be of the most private character, it will become us to appear in full dress."

"I should have anticipated your wishes in those respects, Francis," said the Countess, her heart fluttering like an imprisoned bird that is frightened in its cage, and the colour coming and going on her cheeks a dozen times in a minute.

The Earl then retired, and Eleanor, not daring to trust herself alone with her reflections, rang the bell and ordered the house-steward to wait upon her. That functionary soon made his appearance; and the Countess issued the necessary orders for the banquet. There were but three hours left for the preparations: but money and many servants can accomplish marvels; and her ladyship felt assured that the entertainment would be a magnificent one.

Having instructed the house-steward, Eleanor proceeded to her own chamber, where she issued the requisite commands to her two lady's-maids respecting her toilette;—but when this was done, she found that she had still a couple of hours to while away. She accordingly ordered the carriage, and paid a visit to her friend the Duchess of Devonshire, whom she confidentially acquainted with the circumstance that his Royal Highness was to dine at Desborough House in the evening. The conversation, therefore, dwelt entirely upon this subject; and as a demirep is invariably anxious to make her beautiful acquaintances or companions as bad as herself, the Duchess said everything she could to inflame the imagination of Eleanor in respect to the Prince: so that when the Countess returned home to dress for dinner, her heart palpitated and her bosom heaved with pleasure at the thought of the delightful evening which she was to pass.

Precisely at eight o'clock his Royal Highness made his appearance, and was conducted to the drawing-room, where he was received by the Earl and Countess of Desborough.

Eleanor was gloriously handsome. The grave bashfulness which her nobly-formed countenance wore, imparted a queen-like air to her whole appearance, and contrasted charmingly with the radiance which the diamonds on her raven hair and the lustre of her splendid black eyes diffused around her. She seemed a magnificent vision too perfect for human beauty—a houri of Mahommed's paradise, invested with all the supernal fascination of that elysian sphere.

And, in spite of herself—in spite of all the command which, prompted by her woman's pride and her natural virtue, she had resolved to exercise over her feelings,—in spite, we say, of the immense efforts which she had made to counteract, or rather to subdue, the influence of that insidious language which the Duchess of Devonshire had poured into her ears,—her bright eyes grew brighter beneath the impassioned gaze which the Prince rivetted upon her—and her hand trembled in his own, as he took it with apparent respect, but in reality pressed it gently—and the half-revealed bosom to which his looks then wandered and where they settled gloatingly, heaved to the sigh of pleasure which she could not control.

She remembered not the insolent threat to which the royal voluptuary had dared give utterance on leaving her the last time she had seen him: she thought only that he was the strikingly handsome man the Duchess of Devonshire had loved to paint him in glowing terms; and the consciousness that she was blushing made her blush all the more deeply—while the flood of light that poured into her swimming eyes dazzled and almost bewildered the Prince as he met the glance which flashed upon him from those brilliant orbs.

All these feelings—and emotions—and variations of countenance, which would occupy a whole chapter in order to detail them fully, passed during the few seconds that his Royal Highness held the fair soft hand of that charming lady in his own: then, as she resumed her seat upon the sofa whence she had risen to welcome him, he placed himself by her side, and began to converse in that melodious yet manly voice which possessed so irresistible a sweetness for the fair sex.

Several minutes elapsed ere the Countess could so far compose her thoughts and regain her self-possession as to take part in the discourse, which her husband however sustained with all the spirit of a fine intellect and an elegant taste; and in a short time a domestic entered to announce that dinner was served up.

The Prince gave his arm to Lady Desborough; and as they descended the stairs she felt that he pressed that arm gently with his own—but not in a manner which could have given offence, or been interpreted otherwise than as accidental, even if she had possessed courage and self-command enough at the moment to resent that silent evidence of his passion.

The table, although only laid with three covers, would have presented a superb spectacle to any one unaccustomed to such magnificence. It groaned beneath the burthen of the costliest gold plate, which shone brilliantly in the lustre of the chandelier suspended to the ceiling, and the light of which was reflected in numerous mirrors.

Amidst that glorious flood of radiancy, the handsome Eleanor seemed a goddess in her own Olympian sphere of light;—and so dazzled was the Prince by her transcendent charms, that, epicure as he was, he had scarcely any appetite for the variety of delicacies now served up.

The Earl appeared to be in excellent spirits; and even when his Royal Highness, carried away by the enthusiasm of his feelings, looked and spoke more tenderly with regard to the Countess than a jealous husband would have admired,—and when she, influenced by the same irresistible emotions, gave answers in a voice of silver tremulousness and blushed beneath the rapturous glances thrown upon her,—the nobleman continued to discourse with an increased gaiety—as if, beholding nothing amiss, he abandoned himself to the pleasure of the evening.

The various courses were disposed of—and at length the dessert was placed upon the table. Shortly afterwards the Countess rose to withdraw; and the Prince hastened to open the door for her, no servants being then in the apartment.

She bowed in acknowledgment of this honour; and as she passed out of the room, with that graceful carriage of the arching neck and sloping shoulders for which she was so eminently distinguished, the Prince said in a low and hurried whisper, "Angelic being! I adore you!"

Then, as she crossed the threshold, he beheld the rich blood mantling up over that neck and those shoulders; and he returned to his seat with the inward conviction that he had already gone far towards the accomplishment of a complete triumph over her.

"Your position is a most enviable one, my dear friend," said his Royal Highness to the Earl of Desborough, as the claret jug passed between them; "you assuredly possess as your wife the handsomest and most amiable lady in England."

"Yes—Eleanor is indeed all that is most fascinating and adorable in female shape," returned the nobleman. "But, with the permission of your Royal Highness, we will now terminate that little transaction——"

"If you please, Desborough," answered the Prince. "I really know not how to express my gratitude for this most unexpected and generous act on your part. But whenever the time may come that this hand of mine shall be enabled to affix a signature to a document in order to make it law, your earldom shall be changed into a marquisate, which is not far removed from the dukedom that shall speedily follow after."

"Your Royal Highness will only afflict me by the promise of reward," said the nobleman.

"I am aware that the deed is one of pure friendship on your part," hastily returned the Prince: "nevertheless, I should be wanting in gratitude, did I not express my inclination, although at present utterly deficient in the power, to make a suitable acknowledgment of the great service you are rendering me."

While the heir-apparent was thus delivering himself of frothy phrases, the hollowness of which was perfectly understood by the Earl, who well knew the selfishness of his royal guest,—twenty bank-notes for a thousand pounds each had been counted down on the table by the nobleman; and the Prince, amassing them all together as if they were a bundle of play-bills, thrust them into his waistcoat-pocket; then, drawing forth a letter, he tore off a piece of the back, and with a gold pencil-case scribbled an I.O.U., which he handed to the Earl.

Thus ended this little matter; and the Prince continued to enjoy his wine, the nobleman keeping him company glass for glass. The conversation turned upon a variety of topics: but every now and then his Royal Highness could not prevent himself from saying something complimentary in respect to Lady Desborough; on which occasions the Earl invariably directed the discourse as speedily as possible into another channel.

"I feel so comfortable and so entirely at home," said the Prince at last, "that I could almost wish I was to be your guest for a week, Desborough—instead of only for another hour," he added, looking at his watch. "In fact, I hate having to quit warm rooms and pass through the ordeal of a cold ride in a carriage."

"Your Royal Highness can easily avoid that ordeal," observed the nobleman. "A bed-chamber is at your service beneath my roof: and, indeed," he exclaimed hastily, "I should esteem myself highly honoured were your Royal Highness to condescend to sleep in my humble abode."

"Upon my honour," ejaculated the Prince, as the thought flashed to his memory that the Earl and Countess did not sleep together—a circumstance which we have already stated to be notorious,—"upon my honour, I am inclined to accept this invitation."

The nobleman walked to the window—drew aside the curtain—and looked forth upon the square

"The night is bitterly cold," he said, returning to his seat: "there is a hard frost—and the pavement is quite white. It is enough to give any one his death, merely to pass from the front door into a carriage."

"I hate the cold," cried the Prince, shuddering at the idea of facing the bleak air. "Well, Desborough, I accept your invitation—and I will sleep here to-night."

The Earl accordingly rang the bell, and ordered the servant who answered the summons, to direct the chamber-maids to prepare the best apartment, as his Royal Highness intended to pass the night at the mansion. The domestic bowed and retired; and shortly afterwards another lacquey came to announce that coffee was served in the drawing-room.

Thither the heir-apparent and the Earl proceeded. Eleanor was seated on the sofa: her cheeks were flushed—her eyes shone brilliantly—and there was an agitation, a feverish excitement in her manner which she could not altogether conceal, much less subdue. The truth was, she had already heard from the servants that his Royal Highness intended to sleep at the mansion; and although there was no

thing surprising in the circumstance of her husband having given such an invitation, yet the fact that the Prince had accepted it—nay, she felt assured, must have thrown out some hint which elicited it—was too significant not to be understood by the lady.

Then—Oh! then, how violent was the struggle which had taken place between her virtue and her inclinations: how tumultuous was the agitation which filled her heart, as her physical and her moral nature warred together;—how dire was the conflict between the flesh and the spirit! There was a woman imploring heaven to keep her chaste—clasping her hands and beseeching her God to preserve her in the path of duty—exerting every energy to maintain her footing in the ways of rectitude,—but yielding—bending—succumbing beneath the weight of indomitable passions—burning with the fiercest desires! The battle was maddening—the strife was excruciating. Oh! how she prayed for strength—for succour: and yet her strength failed her fast—and succour came not. She resolved to retreat to her own chamber—to send by a servant an apology for her absence with a plea of indisposition: but scarcely had she thus determined, when voices on the landing without met her ears—and she had barely time to seat herself on the sofa before the Prince and her husband made their appearance.

No wonder, then, that her cheeks were flushed—that her eyes shone with a brilliancy that was wild and feverish: no wonder that her heart palpitated violently and she gave a sudden convulsive start, as the heir-apparent placed himself by her side upon the sofa.

And *he* noticed her emotions, but divined not the true cause: his licentious, profligate, and demoralised nature led him to mistake the results of that severe internal wrestling for the evidences of a passion as heated, as inflamed, and as longing as his own. The Earl, having thrown one rapid glance upon his wife, examined some new China ornaments which had that day been placed upon the mantel-piece: it was therefore clear to Eleanor that he either did not perceive anything strange in her appearance, or that if he did it engendered no unpleasant suspicion in his mind.

Relieved and consoled by the circumstance that her excitement had thus again escaped the observation of her husband,—and summoning all her fortitude to her aid,—the Countess of Desborough assumed a composure, almost verging to a gaiety, which she did not entirely feel; and in the endeavour to seem cheerful, contented, and free from any cause of annoyance or embarrassement, she over-played her part. The consequence was that her manner appeared so supremely happy—her discourse sparkled with such gems of wit and flashes of intellect—her laugh was so melodiously hearty—and her smiles were so enchantingly radiant, that it was impossible for her to prove more agreeable.

The coffee was handed round—the Prince and the Earl each took a small glass of exquisite *liqueur*—and the conversation was progressing in the same brilliant style as before, when his Royal Highness, in quoting a line of poetry, attributed it to the wrong author. Eleanor corrected him: but he declared that he was right. Thereupon the Earl, starting from his seat, volunteered to fetch from the library a volume which would set the matter at rest; and he left the room.

But scarcely had the door closed behind him, when the Prince, seizing the hands of the Countess, pressed them to his lips, covering them with kisses.

"Oh! you are determined to ruin me, body and soul!" murmured Eleanor, allowing her head to droop upon his shoulder, so that her hair mingled with his and her soft warm cheek lay against his own.

"Ruin you, my angel!" cried the Prince, throwing his arms about her neck and straining her to his bosom: "I would die to promote your happiness? O Eleanor—dearest Eleanor—I love—I adore you: drive me not to despair!"

And, unwinding his arms, he raised her head with his hands, and imprinted a thousand kisses upon her lips,—burning kisses which she returned—yes, she returned—for she was now borne headlong on the torrent of voluptuous feelings into which her fate appeared to plunge her.

"Dearest!—dearest Eleanor!" whispered the Prince; "you cannot fail to suspect wherefore I have remained here to-night. Again, therefore, I say—do not drive me to despair. Murmur in my ears a single word—an instruction to guide me to your chamber——"

And once more he strained her to his breast: once more he covered her charming, blushing, burning countenance with kisses;—and, in the delirium of the moment—in the intoxication of ineffable feelings—in the whirl of all the tenderest emotions which woman's heart can know, the yielding Eleanor did murmur the few words of instruction which her daring companion craved.

Then, tearing herself from his embrace, she smoothed her hair and her dress, and strove to tranquillise her sensations and compose her features ere her husband returned to the room.

Fortunately on her account, several minutes yet elapsed before he made his appearance: otherwise he could not have failed to observe the thrilling excitement which possessed his wife, and whence she found it so difficult to recover.

Apologising for his prolonged absence on the ground that he could not immediately find the book which he sought, the Earl of Desborough opened the volume he carried in his hands; and the Prince of Wales was compelled to acknowledge that he was wrong in his opinion and that the Countess was right.

This point being settled, the conversation was pursued until near twelve, when Eleanor rose to withdraw. The Prince took her hand; and, as he pressed it warmly but rapidly, he darted upon her a glance so full of meaning that she was forced to turn away immediately in order to conceal the burning blush which that look called up to her features.

The moment the Countess had quitted the room, a deep and sudden sadness fell upon the Earl—a sadness so profound, so strange, so irresistible, that the heir-apparent could not help observing it. The nobleman complained that indisposition had thus abruptly seized on him; and, endeavouring to smile, he declared it to be nothing—a mere trifle—and already passing away. But that smile—oh! it was so ghastly—so death-like—so positively hideous, that the Prince was alarmed; and, imagining that the Earl was about to faint, he rushed towards the bell.

Lord Desborough started up—caught the hand of his Royal Highness just as it touched the bell-

rope—and exclaimed, "No—no—I am better now—I assure you that I am! But there are moments when this sudden indisposition, to which I am subject, seizes upon me with excruciating agonies."

The Earl immediately rallied; and the Prince was fully satisfied with the explanation which had been given. They remained conversing together for a few minutes longer; and then Lord Desborough in person conducted his Royal Highness to the chamber prepared for him.

The chandeliers were extinguished in the dining and drawing-rooms—one by one, but in quick succession, the domestics ascended to their rooms—one by one also the lights disappeared from the windows of their respective chambers; and in a short time a profound silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

The church-clocks were proclaiming the hour of one, when the door of the Prince's apartment was opened slowly and cautiously;—and his Royal Highness stole forth into the passage, where a lamp was burning.

But scarcely had he crossed the threshold, when an ejaculation of surprise fell upon his ears;—and, to his horror and dismay, he found himself face to face with the Magsman!

CHAPTER LXII.

THE PRINCE AND THE MAGSMAN.

Rooted to the spot—paralysed, as it were—transfixed by the varied feelings which the sudden apparition of this ruffian conjured up in his mind all in a moment,—the heir-apparent could not utter a word, but stood gazing in speechless terror and surprise on the hang-dog countenance which, once seen, could never be forgotten.

"Well, I'm blowed if this isn't the rummest lark I ever knew in my life!" said the Magsman at length; for, well aware that the Prince would not venture to alarm the house and give him into custody, he was as free and independent as possible.

"For heaven's sake, come this way!" whispered his Royal Highness, now recovering the powers of speech, and uttering these words in a voice of mingled entreaty and command.

The Magsman accordingly followed the Prince into the bed-chamber, the door of which his Royal Highness carefully closed.

Scarcely, however, had that door shut, when the Countess of Desborough came airily and lightly down the passage—but with trembling limbs, a countenance ghastly pale, and a bosom upheaved with the suspended breath. For she had left her own door ajar—she had heard that of the Prince open, in spite of the caution which he observed—then she had heard the ejaculation of surprise which had fallen from the Magsman's lips, but which her fancy, influenced by the sudden terror that seized upon it, tortured into an exclamation of rage—next came the sounds of whispering voices—and lastly the door of the heir-apparent's chamber closed again. She looked forth into the passage: no one was there. Her fears rose to an intolerable height. She felt convinced that her husband, suspecting the understanding into which the Prince had drawn her, had watched in the passage—had intercepted his Royal Highness as he was about to seek her apartment—and had followed him into his own chamber, either to cover him with reproaches, or perhaps for some more desperate purpose. For Eleanor had heard of duels fought across tables, by persons holding handkerchiefs between them so that there should be no flinching and no retreat without the imputation of cowardice: she had also read of injured husbands taking the law in their own hands in a very summary manner, and shooting without remorse those adventurous gallants who had either debauched their wives or endeavoured to seduce them;—and, knowing the high feelings and exalted sentiments which her husband entertained, she was struck with the appalling idea that he would not hesitate to wreak his vengeance on his treacherous guest, all Prince and heir-apparent though he were!

Quick as lightning did this train of reflections sweep across the mind of the unhappy lady, convulsing her whole form with anguish, blanching her cheeks, and suspending her very breath: and, under the influence of that fearful consternation, did she hurry along the passage—step noiselessly up to the door of the Prince's chamber—apply her ear to the key-hole—and listen with the attention of an awful interest to what was taking place within.

But her feelings, so tensely wrung—so excruciatingly tried, speedily experienced a boundless relief in one sense,—although only to undergo a painful transition into a state of ineffable wonderment, indignation, and deep humiliation.

Let us however describe the scene that took place in the chamber at the door of which the noble, elegant, and handsome Countess of Desborough was playing the part of eaves-dropper.

"What are you doing in this house?" demanded the Prince, after a long hesitation how he should address the ferocious ruffian who, leaning against the bed-post, surveyed him with cool defiance.

"I suppose I've just as much right to ask you the same question," was the insolent response: "seeing that it's no more your house than it is mine."

"Do you forget who I am, sirrah?" exclaimed the Prince, the words hissing through his set teeth—for he was quivering with a rage that was all the more furious because of its utter impotency.

"Well, I can't say that I do," answered the Magsman. "You're the heir to the throne—and a precious rum heir you are, too. But it seems that you forget who I am: and so I'll just tell you. My name's Joseph Warren—I don't *Esquire* myself, you see: better known by intimate friends as Joe the Magsman. My wife is that dear soul, who now passes in the fine world as Mrs. Brace, and whom you've done me the honour to make your mistress. Yes—and I haven't the slightest doubt that she's your go-between—and pander—and procuress—and everything else good and agreeable. Lord bless ye! d'ye think I can't read the secret of that fine establishment she keeps, and all those pretty girls that she has about her. But why do you stand looking at me in that savage style? I'm only telling you the truth. By the bye, I must thank your Royal Highness for the five hundred guineas you sent me three or four weeks ago through my wife——"

"Wretch! will you make an end of this hideous

bantering?" cried the Prince, bewildered and enraged to a degree that amounted to positive anguish.

"You don't appear to have anything to say for yourself," returned the villain, in a jeering tone: "and therefore I must speak for you. It wouldn't be genteel on my part to treat your Royal Highness with contemptuous silence."

"Again I demand—what are you doing in this house?" exclaimed the Prince, heedless of the fellow's observations.

"And on my side I ask—what were you doing in that sneaking way in the passage?" retorted the Magsman. "But come,—let us be candid with each other. You are the Prince of all the rakes and demireps at the West End—and I'm the Prince of all the buzgloaks, prigs, cracksmen, and flash coves elsewhere. So we meet on equal ground, you see. Well, then—let's have no nonsense between us. I'm here to rob the house—and you were going to creep along the passage to some expectant fair one's bedchamber: as likely as not the lady of the mansion herself—for you're quite capable of it."

"My God! what shall I do with this wretch?" exclaimed the Prince, in a tone of despair. "Villain," he immediately afterwards exclaimed,—"you have escaped from Newgate—and one word will alarm the house and send you back to your old quarters."

"Quite true, Prince of Profligates," responded the Magsman: "but that *one* word you don't dare to utter."

"What do you require?—what can I do to persuade you to depart forthwith?" demanded the heir-apparent, goaded to desperation by the idea that the charming Eleanor was expecting him: for he little thought that she was so near at hand, and listening in horrified amazement and speechless indignation to every word that thus passed between himself and the Magsman.

"What do I require?—what can you do to persuade me to depart?" repeated the ruffian. "Why—I'll tell you in a very few words. I've two pals with me, who're waiting very quietly down in the front kitchen till I go back to them after this little reconnoitre that I was taking of the house when I ran against you. Make it worth our while to bundle off at once—and I can assure you, we shall be much better satisfied to finger some hard cash than run a risk of being seen going out with a parcel containing plate and such like little matters."

"Then you have two companions with you?" said the Prince, exerting all his moral powers to master the rage, vexation, and bitter annoyance which this scene caused him to experience.

"Yes—and they'll agree to any bargain I make with you," replied the Magsman, who saw all along that he had the game in his own hands.

"Now, listen—one word will settle this affair," resumed his Royal Highness, in feverish haste. "Five hundred guineas shall be sent to you to-morrow at any place you choose to appoint——"

"That will do," interrupted the Magsman. "I know I can rely on your word—because you don't dare break it with me. One of my friends down stairs will call at Carlton House to-morrow at midday, and ask if there's any letter for Mr. Smith. He's a genteel chap—Dick the Tramper—and he'll dress up swell for the occasion."

"Let that be the understanding," said the Prince. And now you will undertake to depart——"

"Yes—me and my two pals. I won't waste time by introducing them to you—although they'd be charmed to make your acquaintance. But we'll be off—and what's more, the people of the house shan't suspect to-morrow morning that the place has been entered during the night. It was fortunate that the kitchen window was left unfastened—and so there was no cutting out of panes of glass, or any need to use the jemmy. Good bye, illustrious Prince: and now you may be off to Lady Desborough's bed, if it was her chamber that you was going to."

With this coarse peroration, the volubility of which his Royal Highness did not dare interrupt, for fear of offending the Magsman and producing that disturbance in the house which he had been so anxious to avoid,—the formidable ruffian stole gently out of the apartment: but the slight creaking which the door made on being opened, drowned the noise of *another door* which closed at the same moment at the end of the passage.

His Royal Highness drank a deep draught of water to cool his parched throat, the instant that he found himself alone. He then sank into an arm-chair near the fire that was now smouldering in the grate, and endeavoured to compose his countenance and settle his thoughts.

By degrees he began to congratulate himself on having avoided a disturbance and exposure in the mansion—notwithstanding that this result had been accomplished at the expense of so much humiliation and by the endurance of such cutting insolence;—and, having succeeded in tranquillising his mind, he resolved to proceed to the chamber of the Countess.

Cautiously did he emerge a second time from his apartment—stealthily did he tread along the passage—and in a few moments he reached the door of the room where he hoped to reap a rich reward for the annoyances he had so recently experienced.

But that door was fastened. He knocked gently: there was no response. He knocked again: still all was silent. He listened: no one moved within. Could he have mistaken the chamber? Impossible! for it was the last in the passage, on the left hand. A third time he knocked: and now a light step was heard approaching that door. It was about to be opened!—he was already standing on the threshold of paradise! The blood boiled in his veins with the excitement of passion deeply stirred: his heart palpitated violently. Glorious recollections of all the transcendent charms of the Countess swept through his memory in a moment. She was coming—and he was about to be happy!

"Who is it?" demanded her soft and silvery voice—but, as the Prince fancied, somewhat abruptly.

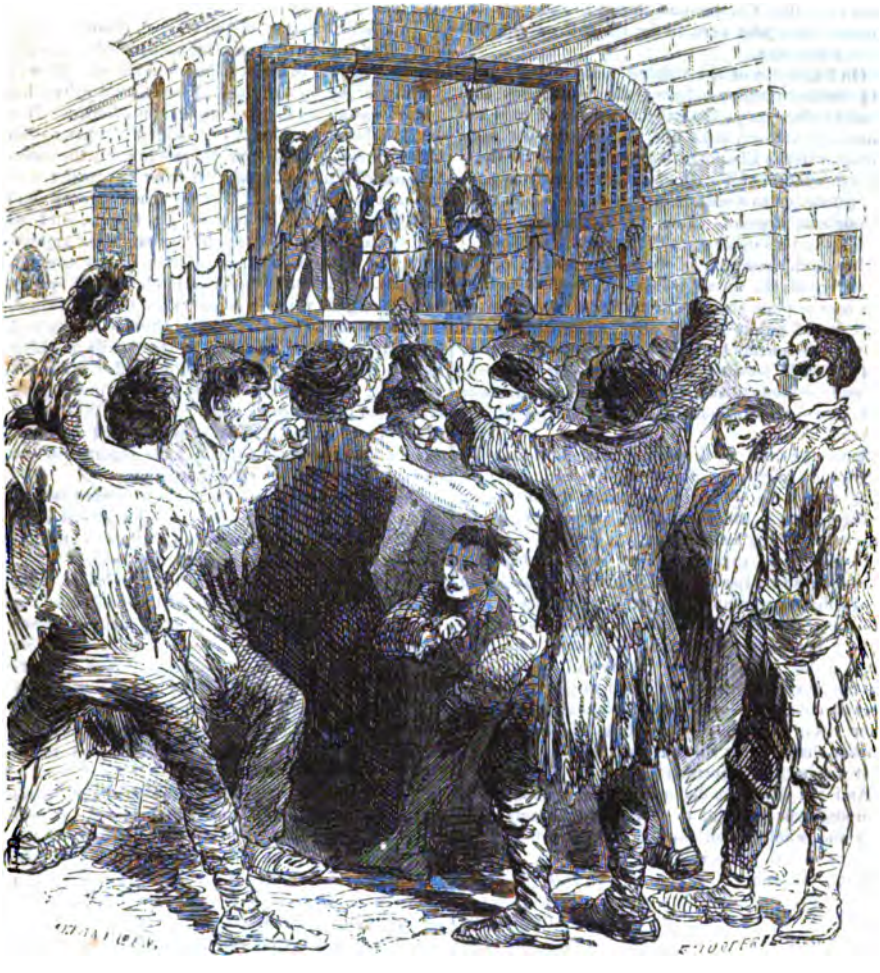
"'Tis I, my angel—your adorer!" he whispered.

"Then I command your Royal Highness to retire to your own chamber," was the stern and imperious response.

And he heard her retreat with a rapid step from the door.

For a few instants he stood stupified—amazed—astounded: then all the indignation of his haughty soul and all the pride of his princely rank asserting their empire, he turned away—disdaining to implore a syllable of explanation.

At an early hour he rose from a sleepless couch, and immediately ordered his carriage. A few minutes afterwards the Earl of Desborough made his appearance, and begged his Royal Highness to re-



mam and partake of the breakfast which was already served up. But the Prince declined in terms so positive as to be almost rude;—and it was even with a certain degree of coldness which he could not master, that he took a hasty leave of the nobleman.

The instant that they had thus separated, a glow of indiscribable pleasure suffused itself over the countenance of the Earl of Desborough; and hurrying to his own chamber, he threw himself on a seat, weeping for very joy!

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE CONDEMNED SERMON.—THE EXECUTION.

It was Sunday morning;—and the Chapel in Newgate prison afforded a scene of deep and dreadful interest.

The two galleries, respectively allotted to the males and females, were filled with prisoners, who presented a somewhat more cleanly appearance than on the occasion of Mrs. Brace's visit to the establishment: for the threat which was invariably held out on the Sabbath, of stopping the roast-beef of those who did not wash for chapel, had produced the desired effect.

In the large circular pew in the middle of the place of worship, Martin and Ramsey were seated. Soper, armed with his keys, kept watch upon them: but this precaution was unnecessary—for escape was impossible!

Consistently with the barbarian cruelty which characterised all the proceedings of what was termed "justice," and suitable with all the law's demands and exigencies, in the time of that detestable monarch George III, the black coffins intended for the two criminals were placed at their feet, inside the enclosure.

The adjacent pews were filled with elegantly dressed ladies—some from the City, and others from the West End,—but all attracted thither to listen to the Condemned Sermon, and see the doomed men who were to be hanged on the following morning.

Oh! talk not of the vitiated taste and the morbid curiosity which influence the multitudes that flock to places of public execution: for if rags and tatters go thither, silks and satins were ever wont to repair to the Chapel of Newgate to hear the funeral exhortation of the Ordinary, until the proceeding amounted to a scandal and a shame which rang throughout Europe. Then the authorities interposed—and a salutary prohibition was the result.

But on the occasion of which we are writing,—in those "good old times" which the people's oppressors love to prate about,—the Sabbath preceding the fatal day of public strangulation, was invested with all possible horrors for the two condemned wretches, and with all possible entertainment for the well-dressed gentlemen and elegantly attired ladies who had been *fortunate* enough to obtain tickets of admission.

Separated from all the rest—rendered most painfully conspicuous—enclosed in that circular pew, Martin and Ramsey were enduring the damnable tortures of a moral Inquisition, preparatory to the infernal crowning catastrophe.

If they raised their eyes, they beheld a bigotted, dogmatic, and superstitious Ordinary, endeavouring to establish a reputation for pulpit eloquence at the expense of *their* feelings already so acutely wrung:—if they looked around them, they saw beauteous faces gazing intently upon them, and bright eyes watching every movement of their muscles with the keenest curiosity;—and if they glanced downward, their vision was appalled by those black objects of sinister shape which stood at their feet.

It was horrible—horrible!

And yet those two doomed men were expected to compose their thoughts to prayer, and fix their ideas only and wholly upon the eternity into which they were so soon to be hurried!

But—Almighty God! how was this possible? Turn whichever way they would, their eyes encountered something to recall their imaginations most painfully—most agonisingly to the affairs of this world, and to the beings who render it a scene of barbarism, wretchedness, and oppression.

Oh! would it not have been better far to allow those men, already hovering between two spheres—that of mortality and that of eternity,—would it not have been more humane, more just, more consistent with true religious feeling, to leave them each in his solitary cell, and thither send the minister of Christ to console—to sooth—to pray—and to promise!

Wherefore permit those curious spectators to flock thither on such an occasion?—why convert the temple of worship into a stage for the representation of a melodrama of thrilling interest?—why place the emblems of the grave at the feet of the doomed wretches?

Because all these proceedings were consistent with the despotic times and sanguinary laws of George III—that monarch who was made up of madness, bigotry, deception, and bloody-mindedness: because everything in that age was done with a view to strike terror into the public mind, and thereby check civilisation, freedom, and progress;—and because our legislators and rulers invariably support those systems of cruelty, barbarism, tyranny, superstition, and wrong, which the millions are enlightened enough to denounce, and humane enough to shudder at!

In a retired corner of the Chapel, George Woodfall—that young and interesting artist who has already been introduced to our readers—was seated. He was led thither by no sentiment of morbid curiosity: his nature was above such an ignominious feeling. But he had been sent by his griping old master—the greedy, avaricious picture-dealer—to study the countenance of Philip Ramsey, in order to transfer it to canvass at his leisure. For so much interest had attached itself to the trial of the forgers, and so highly had the press spoken of the handsome appearance and elegant manners of the younger convict, that Mr. Shrubsole felt assured of obtaining a speedy sale and a good price for a portrait of this individual.

The reverend Ordinary droned through a long and clumsily-composed sermon, by the details of which he had hoped to produce a thrilling effect upon his auditory: and if he could only succeed in wringing tears from the two condemned culprits—Oh! what a grand proof of his eloquence would that be—and what a telling circumstance to have reported in the newspapers of the following morning!

One or two of the elegant ladies who were assembled there, thought it necessary to squeeze out a few tears; and Mr. Soper pursed up his mouth and endeavoured to look as sentimental as possible.

In the gallery, amongst the male prisoners, were the Big Beggarman and Briggs, to whose case the Ordinary likewise alluded—exhorting them and other convicts to take warning from the dreadful spectacle presented to their view by the occupants of the circular enclosure. This advice did not however seem to produce any salutary effect: for the Big Beggarman, stooping his head, whispered some coarse remark to his friend Briggs, who responded in an equally irreverent manner.

The service was concluded: the prisoners, male and female, were marched back to their wards;—and the two doomed men were re-consigned each to his condemned cell. The congregation dispersed; and the Ordinary accepted an invitation to lunch with the governor of Newgate—well knowing that in addition to such substantial or cheering comforts as cold pigeon-pie, bottled stout, and cherry-brandy, he should receive the more frothy but scarcely less welcome compliments which his sermon was expressly fabricated to elicit.

* * * * * * * * *

Damp, raw, and misty broke the fatal Monday morning; and immense crowds were collected in the Old Bailey and in every avenue leading thither.

At the debtors' door of Newgate stood the terrible machine—the huge platform, with its black beams towering high above the heads of the assembled masses.

The bell of St. Sepulchre, which had already begun to toll, appeared to have a gloomier sound than usual, as its iron tongue struck deep and solemn on the ear: more sombre than ever frowned the solid masonry of Newgate upon the gathered multitudes;—and the very air seemed to have acquired a more searching and penetrating chill.

Nevertheless, the crowds commenced their ribald jesting, practical jokes, and licentious conversation—for our precious rulers are either so besottedly igno-

tant or so wilfully criminal as to demoralise the people by means of these accursed exhibitions of public strangulation.

But suddenly a dead silence fell upon the vast mass of spectators; and all eyes were fixed, as if spell-bound, upon the ominous scaffold.

Slowly came forth the funeral procession from the debtors' door: first the Ordinary made his appearance, with open prayer-book in his hands, and reading the service for the dead;—close behind followed the governor of Newgate;—then Martin and Ramsey, both pinioned in the usual manner, ascended the steps of the platform, accompanied by the executioner;—and lastly, the Sheriffs issued from the gaol.

The countenances of the doomed men were ghastly pale: but their lineaments were convulsed with no hideous workings. Rigid, as if the cold hand of the Destroyer lay already upon them, were those features. No tears fell from their eyes: the appalling consternation which was upon them had frozen nature's relieving fountain at its very source. Their senses were enchained as if under the influence of a frightful dream. Stiffened with dread horror, they could scarcely drag their limbs up the steps to the sable platform, in the middle of which were marked the outlines of the trap-door that opened *downward* beneath the fatal cross-beam. Their brains were seared and their feelings were blasted as if with lightnings. There was a tingling in their ears as if evil spirits were whispering awful things: the incantation of a black despair was upon them. An awful terror had paralysed all their faculties: it was a fearful stupefaction, combined with a perfect consciousness of all that was passing—a species of night-mare which they could not shake off, and which held them dumb!

Placed beneath the fatal beam—there they stood transfixed, sustaining themselves on their legs by a kind of mechanical instinct, and not because they sought to meet their doom with firmness. The executioner fastened the ropes round their necks: and then, for the first time, they appeared to start from their automaton condition. For over the countenance of each did an indescribable expression of anguish pass: horror glared in their eyes—the spasmodic writhing which swept through their frames convulsed their features—and their ashy lips were suddenly compressed as if to keep down the cry of mortal agony, that rose to the tips of their tongues.

But, in another moment, the white cotton caps were drawn over those countenances now really hideous — and the executioner, leaping down the steps, entered the vast wooden box which formed the pedestal to that ominous gibbet above.

The Ordinary continued the funeral service—the multitudes, still maintaining a profound silence, kept their looks rivetted on the scene of horrible interest and fearful attraction.

Down came the trap-door — down fell the two doomed men: but, Oh! their fall was suddenly stopped short by the ropes to which they hung;—and there they dangled in the air, dread spasms shooting through their frames—lightnings pouring up into their brain — their hands moving rapidly up and down with the convulsions of dying agony.

And as if the galvanism of that mortal anguish were suddenly wafted throughout the dense assemblage of spectators, a shudder swept over the entire mass; and, even with the most brutalised and degraded, it did them harm to contemplate this awful spectacle of public strangulation.

In a few minutes, however, this feeling and that impression appeared to have lost all their effect: for, so soon as the Ordinary, the governor of Newgate, the executioner, and the Sheriffs had re-entered the prison, the practical jokes, the obscene jests, the bonneting, and the larking began all over again—while hawkers bawled out, "The last Dying Speeches and Confessions of Martin and Ramsey!"

And these printed lies were eagerly caught up by those who had a halfpenny to give for them, although the purchasers well knew that no Dying Speeches had been made at all, and had read the Confessions in the newspapers of the preceding day. But then those narratives had a rough and rudely executed wood-cut of a scaffold at the top—and *this* was the main attraction.

At nine o'clock the bodies were cut down and conveyed into the gaol, where it was understood that the corpse of Martin would be interred at midnight; but the remains of Ramsey had been claimed by some friends who were desirous to bury them elsewhere.

The crowds dispersed—and all the public-houses in the neighbourhood were soon filled: the scaffold was rolled away into the press-yard of Newgate—the Ordinary and the Sheriffs sate down to an excellent breakfast with the governor—and thus ended the accursed scene.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE PORTRAIT AND THE DREAM

It was about seven o'clock in the evening of that day on which Martin and Ramsey were executed; and we again find Mrs. Brace seated alone in her elegantly furnished parlour. But a visitor was speedily announced: and this was the Prince of Wales.

"My dear Fanny," he said, flinging himself upon a seat as soon as he had removed his cloak,—"I have been anxious to see you for three or four days past: but I could not possibly find an opportunity. Octavia will however be here presently; and therefore I resolved to have half-an-hour's chat with you before her arrival."

"She believes, then, that you have just returned to town?" remarked Mrs. Brace, inquiringly.

"Yes: I longed to see the sweet girl again—and I wrote her a note this morning, stating that I came back to London last night, and that I hoped she would bless me with an interview here this evening. She is sure to keep the appointment," added his Royal Highness.

"And pray, have you ever thought how this amour is to end?" asked the milliner, who had latterly begun to reflect that if an explosion should take place in that respect, her own establishment would be ruined. "To tell you the truth," she continued, "I look upon it as far more serious than any other love-affair in which you were ever engaged—at least within my knowledge. For here is a young creature, tender and confiding, and who believes you to be plain Mr. Harley, with a country-seat somewhere, and living at an hotel when in town; and it must happen, sooner or later, that accident will reveal to her your real rank. Then, in the first feeling of anguish, she will betray all—everything ——"

"My dear Fanny," interrupted the Prince, "I know all that you would say; and your alarms are not without foundation. Within the last few days I have myself reflected very seriously on this matter. In the first flush of that ardent passion with which the dear girl inspired me, all other considerations were absorbed; but, awaking as if from a dream, I now perceive all the perils which are likely to ensue. To reveal myself to her, were impossible: to continue with the constant risk that she may discover who I am, is fraught with danger."

"And if this amour should lead to *other* consequences?" said Mrs. Brace: "if Octavia should find herself in the way to become a mother——"

"I know not how to act—I am bewildered!" exclaimed the Prince, in a tone of deep vexation. "But we will talk over this matter on a future occasion. It was relative to the Countess of Desborough that I wished to speak particularly to you now."

"And it was likewise concerning her ladyship that I was anxious to see you," said Mrs. Brace; "for I felt assured there was something wrong in that quarter."

"Ah! how could you possibly have formed such a conjecture?" demanded the Prince.

"Because, on the very day after I called upon her ladyship, and the particulars of which interview I sent you in a hastily written note on my return home, one of her servants came with an imperative command that my account should be sent to her ladyship without delay. So urgent was the message, that I instantaneously complied: and in the course of that very same afternoon the sum due to me was brought by the same domestic. At the bottom of the bill were these words:—'*The Countess of Desborough will not in future trouble Mrs. Brace to wait upon her as hitherto with the newest fashions.*' This intimation," added the milliner, "is not to be misunderstood: it is a withdrawal of her ladyship's custom from my house."

"I see it all!" exclaimed the Prince, a light breaking in upon him. "She must have overheard the conversation which took place between me and your wretched husband!"

"Conversation! — husband!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, starting and turning very pale.

"I will explain myself," said the Prince.

He then related all those adventures in connexion with his visit to Desborough House, which are already known to the reader—merely suppressing the fact that the Earl had lent him twenty thousand pounds. But he mentioned how his lordship had invited him to dinner—how Eleanor had promised to admit him to her chamber—how he had encountered the Magsman—and how her ladyship's door was afterwards fastened against him.

"And did you yield to the extortion of that villain?" inquired Mrs. Brace, deeply humiliated at the thought that her own husband should thus have insulted the Prince so grossly a second time.

"What could I do?" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "It was impossible for me to risk persecution and exposure at the hands of that man, who already knows too much concerning me," he continued; "and therefore the money was paid in the way he had stipulated. That the Countess must have left her chamber, listened at my door, and overheard everything which took place between me and that scoundrel, is very evident. Hence her refusal to keep her promise and admit me to her room: hence also the summary manner in which she has withdrawn her custom from you. For that ruffian, whom I will not call your husband, said enough to make her ladyship understand that you and I were very intimately connected, and that all you had said to her in the morning was entirely in my behalf."

"You have therefore abandoned all hopes in that quarter?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"Far from it!" exclaimed the Prince. "Those burning kisses which I gave and which were returned with equal ardour — those delicious toyings and that voluptuous dalliance in which I revelled for a few moments, during her husband's absence from the room—the deep hold which this passion has taken of my heart—and a certain sentiment of pride prompting me to triumph over the coy and haughty beauty,—all these motives, my dear Fanny, prevent me from abandoning my designs regarding the lovely Countess. I am maddened by the contemplation of her image: my veins boil with the fervour of my desires. And her own nature is so warm—so impassioned — so glowing, that it must be paradise to repose in her arms. By heaven!" ejaculated the Prince, with almost a wild emphasis,—"she shall be mine, by fair means or foul."

"And is it for this purpose that you have sought my advice?" asked the milliner.

"Assuredly so," responded his Royal Highness. "Place all your powers of invention upon the rack—torture your imagination to the extreme—but fail not to devise some project which shall give that delicious creature to my arms."

"For the life of me, I can think of nothing!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "Unless, indeed——"

"Unless, what?" demanded the Prince, impatiently.

"Unless actual violence be resorted to—or some deeply laid stratagem," returned the milliner.

"Be it either—I hardly care which," added the impassioned George, "so long as we succeed. But I do not ask you to make up your mind at once: the matter is a serious one, and requires consideration."

"In the course of a day or two I will devise some project," said Mrs. Brace.

At this moment Harriet entered the room, to announce that Miss Clarendon had arrived.

The Prince sprang from his seat, and hastened to the apartment where the beauteous girl was waiting for him.

She flew into his arms; and tears of joy streamed down her blushing cheeks, as she returned the ardent kisses which he imprinted on her moist red lips. Then she gazed with an expression of the most enthusiastic affection and admiration, on the fine countenance of her seducer; and a passionate love shone in the splendid blue eyes of this charming creature.

Having compelled her to lay aside her bonnet and scarf, and seating himself by her side on a sofa, with his left arm encircling her waist and his right hand locked in her's, the Prince said, "To me, dearest Octavia, it has appeared an age since last we met."

"And to me also!" murmured the lovely girl.

"Never did you seem so radiantly beautiful as

you are this evening, my Octavia," exclaimed the Prince, at that moment forgetting the Countess of Desborough as completely as if there were no such being in existence.

"And never did you appear in my eyes so eminently handsome," was the soft response. "But even though we have been separated for an entire age, during your absence in the country," continued the charming Octavia, her eyes and countenance becoming overpoweringly brilliant in light and beauty as a glow of impassioned animation flooded her exquisite features,—"I have nevertheless had something to console me," she added with the most winning archness.

"Indeed!" cried the Prince, straining her affectionately to his bosom.

"Yes: your portrait!" said Octavia, with the same tone and manner of playful slyness.

"My portrait!" repeated his Royal Highness.

"It is as I tell you," continued Miss Clarendon "A few days ago my sister and myself visited a printshop to purchase some drawings: and there we saw a portrait which had just been issued of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"Ah!" ejaculated her lover, fixing his eyes upon her countenance in order to read in its expression whether she entertained any suspicion of his identity with the heir-apparent to the English throne.

"Yes," she resumed, with an artlessness of manner that relieved all his fears on that head in a moment: "the portrait of the Prince caught my view—and I was instantaneously struck by the extraordinary resemblance which it bore to you. Pauline made the same remark—and I purchased it. Oh! my dearest George, I can assure you that ever since that day I have passed hours at a time in gazing upon the noble countenance delineated on that paper; and the longer I have dwelt on it, the more wonderful has the likeness appeared. The same high and intellectual forehead—the same hair—the same facial outline—even to the very expression of the features——"

"You flatter me too highly, charming girl, in thus comparing me to the Prince," said his Royal Highness, suddenly silencing her with a rapturous kiss.

"Oh! far from it!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms about his neck; and retaining her countenance at a short distance from his own, she surveyed him with renewed earnestness and impassioned attention. "Is it not strange that the resemblance should be so perfect in all its details?"

"There are instances of extraordinary likenesses of this kind, my love," answered the Prince. "You have doubtless read in the newspapers the recent romantic trial in which Sir Richard Stamford bore a part; and you may remember that this gentleman is represented as strikingly resembling the Royal Family."

"Yes—I recollect," said Octavia. "But, although I have never seen him, I do not think for a moment that he can bear so perfect a likeness to the Prince as yourself. And now, my beloved George, tell me when you intend to seek an introduction to my father and visit us in Cavendish Square. Oh! I implore you to interpose no unnecessary delay in taking that step! There are times—pardon me for speaking thus frankly—when I tremble from head to foot lest my father should discover the secret of my love—our stolen interviews ——"

"Have patience, sweet Octavia, for a few weeks longer," said the Prince; "and then ——"

"A few weeks!" she repeated, in a tone of almost anguished disappointment. "Oh! wherefore this long interval ——"

"It is absolutely necessary that I should settle certain family affairs, my beloved Octavia," interrupted his Royal Highness,—"before I can present myself at your abode. Be assured, however, that no farther delay shall take place ——"

"But in the meantime, what is to prevent you from forming the acquaintance of my father?" asked Octavia, an indistinct doubt of her lover's sincerity—a doubt faint as the hue which the red rose-tea throws upon marble—agitating her mind for a moment, but softly and slightly as the flower waves in the still air: then, ashamed and angry at herself for having allowed such a suspicion to flash across her mind even for an instant, she hastened to observe, "I believe all you tell me, dearest George—I have the utmost confidence in your love and in your honour: but, Oh! you will render me completely happy—you will make me the most joyous being on the face of the earth—if you will only grant my request, and seek an introduction to my father."

The Prince was troubled by these words, in which there was an appealing earnestness showing that Octavia was accustomed to reflect upon the delay which he interposed in becoming a visitor at Mr. Clarendon's dwelling upon the usual terms of acquaintanceship prior to assuming the more decisive part of a suitor for the hand of that gentleman's elder daughter: and when he coupled this anxiety on her side with the affair of the portrait, he dreaded lest the most trivial incident or the slightest casualty should lead to a discovery of his princely rank.

"You are silent, my beloved—you appear to be vexed with me for having spoken so frankly on a subject which nearly and closely concerns my happiness?" exclaimed Octavia, with a sweetness of tone and manner that was charmingly seductive though unaffectedly natural. "Oh! I am certain that you cannot be offended with me, George! Remember that I have refused you no proof of my ardent and eternal affection; and you surely will not deny me this easily accomplished testimony of your own. You say that you have family affairs to settle: but they cannot prevent you from forming new acquaintances, if you will. Even supposing that your relations should object to your union with me, they would not suspect that you entertained the idea of such an alliance from the simple fact of obtaining an introduction to our house. Besides, dear George, the time must come when you will accomplish your solemn vows—your sacred pledges ——"

"Can you doubt it, my beloved?" exclaimed the Prince, scarcely knowing how to reply to a series of arguments which were incontrovertible. "Do not question me for the present, I implore you: in a few weeks you will cease to have occasion for annoyance on this head. In love there must be a blind confidence—an implicit faith—a full reliance;—or else it is not a sincere and deeply-rooted affection."

"Do you for a moment doubt my love?" murmured Octavia, the tears starting forth upon her long lashes. "Oh! it were cruel indeed to suspect the intensity of that devotion—that idolatry—that worship which I experience towards you. For do you know, George, that if you were to prove faithless to

me, I should go mad—or else I should end my days in suicide? I could not survive the loss of your love: it is the air which I breathe—it seems to have absorbed all other ties that bound me to existence ere I knew the happiness of thus loving and being beloved. And I will tell you what a strange—what a dreadful dream I had the other night;—indeed, it was on the very night following the day on which I procured the portrait that I call yours. On retiring to my chamber, and after Pauline was asleep, I sate up for an hour contemplating that picture, and comparing all its lineaments with your own: for your image is so faithfully and accurately impressed upon my mind, that I see you before me, even when we are separated, as plainly as I behold you now. Well, having studied that portrait until its lips appeared to smile at me and its eyes to look love to mine, I retired to rest. Sleep came upon me; and then methought that I was seated with you in a delicious arbour. It was Spring-time: the blossoms fed the air with their fragrance—the heavens were of cloudless blue and stainlessly sunny—and the birds carolled in their verdant retreats. We sate gazing upon each other in silence—our looks speaking more eloquently than our words could have done. Oh! thus far the dream was elysian: my soul was bathed in happiness ineffable. But suddenly a gorgeous train of nobles and brilliantly-dressed ladies appeared in sight; and starting from your seat—tearing yourself from my arms—you hurried towards the procession, as if to command that it should pass on without recognising you. But a name was spoken by some voice—and that name was the Prince of Wales. The sickness of death came over me—and I fainted. When I returned to consciousness, I fancied that utter darkness had closed in around me. Rising from the cold ground to which I had fallen, I groped my way amidst densely interwoven shrubs and thickly growing trees, the dew from the foliage moistening all my garments and damping my hair which I believed to be streaming wildly and dishevelled over my shoulders. Suddenly I saw a light in the distance: I advanced towards it;—every instant it grew stronger and stronger—until a glorious blaze of lustre flowed from the open portals of a church. Impelled by that strange influence which hurries us on in our dreams, and which indeed sometimes prompts us in our actions when we are awake, I entered the sacred edifice. With trembling steps and an appalling presentiment of evil lying like a weight of lead upon my heart, I approached the altar, around which I beheld assembled that gorgeous train of nobles and ladies whom I had seen in the earlier portion of my vision. But one form stood out in proud contrast from all the rest; and that form was thine, my George. But scarcely had my eyes thus settled upon you, when the solemn verse of the clergyman bestowed the nuptial blessing upon yourself and a lady whose hand you held in your own. A rending shriek escaped my lips—and I awoke. Nor was that shriek a part of the dream—but a real expression of indescribable anguish: for Pauline had been awakened by it—and, seriously alarmed, she inquired what was the matter. I soothed her apprehensions on my account by telling her that I had experienced a horrible dream, but the nature of which I did not unfold to her. For the remainder of the night my feverish brow pressed a sleepless pillow; and never—never was the dawn of morning more welcome. Oh! this dream has haunted me oftentimes since—yes, a hundred times during the few days which have elapsed since it occurred."

"But you put no faith in idle visions, my beloved?" said the Prince, more profoundly troubled than before at the strange narrative which had come from Octavia's lips, and which he would have interrupted more than once during the recital, had he not been enchained by the species of fearful and prophetic interest wherewith it was invested. "Such a dream is easily accounted for, dearest," he continued, "you had been gazing on a portrait in which you traced a resemblance to me—it was the predominant idea in your mind when sleep fell upon your eyes—and your imagination wreathed a host of wild and romantic fancies into the vivid and strongly-coloured texture of a vision."

"Oh! I am well aware that this is the true mode to account for it," exclaimed Octavia: "but it was not the less painful at the time—and the frequent trains of melancholy thought which its remembrance engenders, distress me occasionally more than I could possibly make you understand."

"Of what nature are those thoughts, my beloved?" inquired the Prince, determined to probe the young lady's mind to the very bottom, since the discourse had turned on this subject; and moreover, he felt that he was already standing on the verge of an abyss.

"You will only chide me if I give you the explanation you desire, dear George," said Octavia, casting a timid look upon her lover.

"No—on the contrary, I wish you to be frank and explicit, my angel," returned the Prince: "for it is my duty and my desire to tranquillise all your misgivings," he added insidiously.

"Misgivings! Oh! I have none when with you," cried the lovely creature, pressing her lips upon his cheek. "But you asked me for an explanation of those thoughts which my dream has left behind, and which steal upon me at times in spite of every effort which I make to throw them off. For, when alone, or if at all dispirited, I find myself giving way to sad imaginings, akin to that vision, and which cause me infinite torture. I reflect that if you were indeed other than you have represented yourself—if the portrait should prove to be so perfect a resemblance of you, because you are its real original—and if I have surrendered up my heart, and what is more—my honour—to the heir-apparent to the throne of these realms,—Oh! then madness or suicide would be the result. For innocence is a balm even to the breaking heart: but that anodyne would not be mine! On occasions, my thoughts are continued in another strain;—and instead of foreseeing madness or suicide as the crowning catastrophe, it appears to me as if all my love would turn to the bitterest hate, and that I would even throw myself at the feet of the King and demand justice against his son, my seducer! But, when I succeed in arousing my mind from these most painful reveries, I am so ashamed—so vexed—so angry at having given way to speculations so wild and to suspicions so injurious, my beloved George, to you, that, I am thrown into a perfect fever of excitement; and the blood circulates like lightning in my veins—my ears tingle—my tongue grows parched—my temples throb—my eye-balls burn! And now you will pardon me, my George, for having thus frankly unbosomed myself to you;—and you will cease to be asto-

wished if I still urge my prayer that you will lose no time in obtaining from some mutual friend an introduction to my father."

"You know not how profoundly I am afflicted, my beloved Octavia," said the Prince, with his most melting tone and soothing manner, "by all you have told me this evening. The idea that I can possibly be any other than your own George Harley, is of course too ridiculous to need any protestation on my part. But that you should give way to such desponding thoughts at one time, and to such maddening reflections at another,—this it is that so deeply grieves me. Now, my adored girl," he exclaimed, in an impassioned tone, "I beseech you, by that love which you bear for me—by that love which I entertain for you,—by all our past happiness and future hopes, Octavia,—do I conjure you to place unlimited confidence in me. I ask but a delay of six weeks: at the end of that time I will give you such reasons for my conduct as shall make you regret that you even for an instant mistrusted my sincerity. What those reasons are, I cannot—must not—will not at present explain——"

"Oh! your anger would kill me!" exclaimed the yielding and tender Octavia, flinging herself upon her lover's breast and weeping profusely. "Yes—I will grant the delay which you have demanded——My God! I have no alternative——And now kiss me—tell me that you are no longer chagrined with me: for, oh! your love has become so necessary to my happiness—it is a part of my very life!"

"Yes—I will kiss away those tears, my angel!" said the Prince, straining her in his arms.

CHAPTER LXV

THE MILLINER'S PARLOUR.

We must now return to Mrs. Brace's parlour, into which Lord Florimel was introduced by Harriet, the lady's-maid, a few minutes after the Prince of Wales had quitted it to join the lovely Octavia in another apartment.

"This is a pleasure which I little expected, my dear Gabriel," exclaimed the milliner,—"the promise you sent me in reply to my note, having remained unfulfilled for several days."

"I wish to God the note had never been sent to me at all!" cried Florimel, throwing himself with an unfeigned air of vexation upon a seat.

"What can you mean?" demanded Mrs. Brace. "Was not the bearer a truly divine creature?"

"And it is precisely because a divine creature was the bearer of the letter, that I am half maddened by the result," returned Florimel.

"Indeed!" ejaculated the milliner, now recalling to mind the little incident which had occurred in respect to the charming daughters of Mr. Clarendon and Camilla Morton.

"I am driven to desperation," resumed Florimel. "Octavia and Pauline were passing my house when your beautiful messenger came out—and all kinds of detrimental suspicions have been the consequence. If you had sent an old hag of sixty, there would have been no harm: but to make that sylph-like creature the bearer of your note—a heavenly being who appears to be in mourning for the deaths her fine eyes have inflicted——"

"She is indeed angelic," observed Mrs. Brace.

"Angelic!" repeated Florimel: "I must admit that all possible ideas of female loveliness are realised and combined in her person—my own Pauline being left out of the question. But Pauline is as cruel as she is beautiful. Only conceive my astonishment—my grief—my despair, when, a few hours after your messenger had called—and just as I was about to pay a visit to Mr. Clarendon's house in Cavendish Square—a note came from Pauline, upbraiding me with my perfidy—explaining the reasons of her anger—and begging that everything might be considered at an end between us."

"And can you not console yourself for the loss of Pauline, by the possession of Camilla?" asked Mrs. Brace. "If so, I promise you that the sweet girl shall become your conquest——"

"I dare not think of it!" interrupted Florimel, almost savagely. "And yet when I reflect that Pauline has not even condescended to notice the explanatory letters which I have sent her—and that she has refused to see me when I called——"

"This is a cruelty surpassing all I ever heard of," said Mrs. Brace. "It would bring the haughty beauty to her senses if you were to give her a rival in reality."

"I am so grieved—so vexed, that I know not how to act," exclaimed the young nobleman. "The truth is, as I have already assured you, that I love Pauline—worship—adore her——"

"But you are not to be made the butt of her caprices and whims," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "Come, my dear Gabriel—manifest an independent spirit——"

"You seem most anxious that I should become the bidder in the market for this charming flower—this beauteous Camilla!" cried Florimel, in a tone of impatience: and yet he had not the moral courage to put an end to the discourse, or fly away from the sphere of temptation. "But the truth is, my dear friend," he continued hastily,—"that young creature has only recently lost her parents—she is still in mourning for them—and it would be a scandal and a shame to wrong her. No—I could not do it—I could not do it!" he added emphatically, his better feelings obtaining the mastery over his mind.

"It would not be the first orphan whom you had seduced, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace.

"No — unfortunately —— But I will not be tempted!" he exclaimed abruptly.

At this moment the door opened, and Camilla Morton entered the room, to make some inquiry of Mrs. Brace respecting a piece of work on which she was engaged: but, the instant she beheld that her mistress was not alone, she murmured a rapid apology for the intrusion, and was about to withdraw.

"Do not go away, my dear child," said the milliner, in that kind and motherly tone which she was in the habit of assuming towards her young ladies—especially to those who had not as yet fallen into the meshes of seduction: "this is Lord Florimel—the good nobleman to whom you took a letter for me the other day, and who has called to liquidate the demands which I had upon his extravagant cousin. Now my love—what is it you wish to know?"

Camilla advanced with modest timidity, holding in her hand the piece of work; and displaying it to

ner mistress, she put sundry queries, which Mrs. Brace took as long a time to answer as possible. Indeed she elaborated her instructions so much that she succeeded in detaining the young girl upwards of five minutes in the room—during which interval Lord Florimel could not take his eyes off her. For her mourning garb rendered her so sweetly interesting and set off to such advantage the beauty of her complexion, that the nobleman felt all his good resolves thawing within him and all his grosser passions as rapidly excited.

When Camilla quitted the room, followed by the enraptured looks of Florimel,—she herself, however, not observing the intentness of his gaze,—Mrs. Brace said, with one of her most fascinating and archest smiles, "Is she not perfect?"

"Ravishing!" exclaimed the young nobleman, unable to subdue his enthusiasm. "If I did not love Pauline, I could love Camilla."

"And you will love her all the same," said the milliner. "Next Sunday evening you will sup with me: Camilla alone shall be present with us. In the meantime—for this is only Monday—I shall have leisure to insinuate into her mind all those little praises concerning you which produce so great an effect upon young persons."

"No—no—I will not promise—I will not come!" ejaculated Florimel.

"There can at all events be no harm in your passing an agreeable evening," urged Mrs. Brace.

"Well, well—I will think of it—I will let you know to-morrow," said Gabriel: and hastily shaking the milliner's hand, he took an abrupt departure.

"That matter is as good as settled," murmured Mrs. Brace to herself as the door closed behind the retreating form of the young nobleman. "Camilla will be worth a thousand guineas to me in the very first instance."

Scarcely had the unprincipled—selfish—heartless woman made this reflection, when Harriet again entered, ushering in Mrs. Lindley, the old midwife of Fore Street, Lambeth. The servant immediately withdrew; and the harridan paid her respects to Mrs. Brace, glancing however suspiciously round the room to assure herself, with her habitual caution, that no listener was near.

"What brings you hither, my good friend?" inquired Mrs. Brace.

"Hush!—not so loud;—walls have ears!" murmured the midwife, speaking in a low whisper, and placing a long lean finger to her lip. "That dear girl, Caroline Walters——"

"Ah! what—already?" ejaculated the milliner, bending forward in an attitude of earnest attention.

"Hush—a miscarriage!" said the old woman, who, having by this time put on her spectacles with the great circular glasses, fixed her small dark, reptile-like eyes through them upon the countenance of Mrs. Brace. "Yes—a miscarriage——"

"Well—that is a matter for rejoicing," observed the milliner. "But how is she?"

"Somewhat excited — irritable — and nervous," was the answer. "When the pains first took her, she insisted upon having a surgeon—and she grew quite violent because I remonstrated with her. I was therefore compelled to yield to her request—and she became comparatively tranquil. When the babe was born, and the doctor pronounced it to be dead, she insisted on seeing it; and weak and suffering as she was, such a terrible expression swept over her countenance that if I were to live for a thousand years I could not forget it. But—hush! what noise was that?" demanded the midwife, with startled manner and in a hurried whisper

"Nothing—nothing: a carriage in the street," returned the milliner. "But this expression of countenance——"

"Was of the darkest—most fiend-like malignity," added the old woman. "I could not have supposed that such a young creature was susceptible of such a hellish passion as that which alone could have produced such a look. But then, as she herself has told me, Spanish blood circulates in her veins——"

"And what can this fact have to do with the demoniac expression that her features suddenly assumed?" demanded Mrs. Brace.

"Vengeance upon her seducer!—vengeance on the father of that still-born babe!" replied Mrs Lindley, in so low a tone that her words would no have been audible were they in the least degree less emphatic. "I am accustomed to read the soul through the index of the countenance; and never was a feeling more eloquently—more intelligibly — or more fearfully expressed upon human lineaments."

"You surprise — grieve — alarm me," said Mrs. Brace. "But perhaps it was the effect of a sudden paroxysm of pain——"

"No: I can easily distinguish between physical anguish and the workings of the mind," interrupted Mrs. Lindley. "So struck was I by the incident which I have mentioned, that I determined to call and communicate it to you by word of mouth: otherwise I should have merely announced the *accouchement* of Miss Walters, by means of a letter. But believe me, my dear madam," added the midwife impressively,—"believe me, I say, that this young girl meditates some scheme of infernal vengeance against her seducer; and as such a proceeding might lead to an exposure of all the circumstances of her case, whatever they may be——"

"Yes—yes: I comprehend you," said Mrs. Brace, nervously: "and that exposure would perhaps involve the mention of my name in a manner extremely prejudicial to my establishment."

"That is precisely what I foresaw," observed the midwife; "and therefore I resolved to call and give you due warning of the vindictive sentiments which Miss Walters undoubtedly cherishes towards her seducer."

"I take it very kind of you, my good friend—I am infinitely obliged to you," exclaimed the milliner. "In the course of the week I will call and see Caroline—and I shall be able to tranquillise her. If not, I must get her sent down into the country the moment she is well enough to leave your house."

"That would be by far the best plan," said Mrs. Lindley: "or else," she added, after a short pause, "*out of the country altogether.*"

"Something of the kind, decidedly," returned the milliner. "By the bye, Rachel Forrester will have to pay you another visit in the course of two or three weeks. You remember that I hinted something to this effect at the time when I introduced Caroline Walters to your establishment."

"I never forget any matter of business, my dear madam," said the midwife, suffering her feature

to relax into a smile, which was however grim and repulsive enough.

She then rose and took her departure.

It being now the hour when supper was served up in the young ladies' room, Mrs. Brace repaired thither to preside at the table; and it was eleven o'clock when she returned to her own private parlour. The Prince of Wales was waiting for her there, Octavia Clarendon having left him a few minutes previously.

"The evils which you presaged just now, my dear friend," he said, speaking in an agitated manner, "are already developing themselves. Octavia has obtained my portrait, *in which she discovers a marvellous likeness to Mr. Harley.* And no wonder, indeed! But she has likewise had dreams which have left strange thoughts behind; and the faintest whisper—the slightest incident will cause the whole fatal truth to flash to her comprehension."

"She has told you all this?" said Mrs. Brace, seriously alarmed.

"Yes—and in the most artless manner possible," returned the Prince.

"Then wherefore did you not seize the opportunity to break to her gradually who you really are——"

"Because it is in the nature of man to put off the hour of evil or of danger as long as possible," interrupted his Royal Highness; "and because she frightened me by certain observations which she made."

"And those observations?" said the milliner inquiringly.

"Were to the effect that if I deceived her, she would throw herself at the feet of the King and demand justice!" responded the Prince, in a low and solemn tone. "The danger is most serious—most menacing! It would be as much as all my prospects of wearing the crown are worth——"

"Yes: exposure would be terrible—ruinous!" said Mrs. Brace, in a musing manner.

"I have managed to obtain a delay of six weeks before the time when I have solemnly pledged my-

self to procure an introduction to her father," continued the Prince: "we have therefore ample leisure to decide upon some expedient. But if in the interval she should happen to see me in my carriage——However," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "we must leave it to the chapter of accidents. If there's an exposure, we can't help it: and if there be none, so much the better."

Having thus endeavoured to console and reassure himself, his Royal Highness put on his cloak and hat, and took his departure.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE "SUBJECT."

It was midnight: and Mr. Thurston was seated by the fire in his surgery, reading a medical book.

He referred to his watch and found that it was twelve o'clock precisely.

A dead silence prevailed throughout the dwelling: but in a few moments it was broken by the tinkling of the bell which hung in that room.

The surgeon started from his seat—threw the volume upon the table—and, opening the door leading into the yard, hastened to unfasten the gate communicating with the stables.

Two men instantly entered the premises, carrying some heavy and sinister-looking object between them, and as the pale beams of a sickly moon flickered on their repulsive countenances, a cold shudder passed even through the frame of the phlegmatic, selfish, and usually imperturbable Thurston.

"Punctual you see, sir, as clock-work," whispered the Busgloak.

"This way—quick!" said Thurston; and the two men followed him into the surgery, on the floor of which they threw their burthen heavily.

It was *something* long and supple, enclosed in a large sack.

We have already stated, in a previous chapter, that there were three doors to the surgery,—one communicating with the consulting-parlour, the second with the yard, and the third with an apartment of which we promised to give further details.

Throwing open the door of this apartment, and leading the way with a light in his hand, Mr. Thurston bade the two men follow him with their burthen.

The room thus entered was small and nearly naked in respect to furniture. A long dissecting table—a pail to catch the fluid which flowed from a corpse when opened—a rope suspended to a pulley fixed to the ceiling, and used to raise the head of the "subject" as high as the purposes of the experimentalist might require—and several anatomical instruments scattered about upon the table,—these were the principal features of the place. A dark green curtain covered the window, which was protected by iron bars; and the floor was strown with coarse red sand.

Miles the Busgloak and Dick the Tramper carried their burthen into this apartment; and while one retained a tight hold of the bottom of the sack, the other, removing a cord which closed the mouth, proceeded to drag forth its contents. A human head appeared—then the upper part of a man's body—and, the sack being abruptly drawn away, the entire form was exposed to view, dressed in the garments which it had on when cut down from the fatal beam in front of Newgate!

For "the subject" thus purchased by the surgeon was Ramsey the forger; and a portion of the halter still encircled his neck!

The countenance was as colourless as Parian marble—but neither distorted nor hideous. All the convulsive workings which are inseparable from so violent a death as that of strangulation by the accursed cord, seemed to have subsided, by the subsequent relaxation of the features, into that calm and sleep-like placidity which follows an easy and natural dissolution. The eyes were closed—the long dark lashes resting motionless upon those cheeks whereon not a hue nor a tint of life was left: the mouth was partially open—the fine teeth gleaming between the pale lips. Over the brow fell curls of black hair, soft and silky as that of a woman; and it was easy to perceive that ere this countenance lost the animation of vitality, it must have been pre-eminently handsome and well calculated to make an impression on the heart of a susceptible lady.

"Well—what d'ye think of this here stiff'un?" demanded Miles the Busgloak of the surgeon.

"Stiff'un be damned!" ejaculated Dick the Tramper. "It's as limp and yielding as a young babby; and a more lovelier corpse I never set eyes on. It's quite a pleasure and a recreation like to surwey such a specimen of dead natur'—for I s'pose I may call it in that there manner."

"I'm blowed if you ain't getting sentimental over it, Dick," said the Busgloak, casting a look of deep disgust upon his comrade.

"And the sooner you place the body upon that table, the better I shall be pleased," exclaimed the surgeon, with an imperious motion of the hand.

"Heave him up, Miles," said the Tramper; and the subject was speedily stretched at full length on the dissecting-board, its head resting on the elevated part at one extremity.

Mr. Thurston then conducted the two men back into the surgery, where he counted down the stipulated sum.

"All right!" said the Busgloak, taking up the coin. "At any future time, sir, we shall be glad of your orders as heretofore. You must admit that we did the thing well in this here instance—togging ourselves off spruce, and going to the Sheriff's as if we was Ramsey's most particular bussim friends——"

"And imploring that the body might be given up to us to receive decent burial," added the Tramper.

"Ah! it was finely managed—and no mistake," continued Miles. "White cambric fogles up to our eyes—a precious snivelling look about us—a few holler groans——"

"I have no doubt you played your part to perfection," interrupted Mr. Thurston. "Good night to you both," he added, with that abruptness which unmistakably told the two men he would rather have their room than their company.

They accordingly took their departure; and Mr. Thurston returned to the dissecting-chamber.

Holding the candle in his hand, he approached the table: but suddenly he started—and though naturally courageous as well as utterly devoid of superstitious belief, he staggered back a few paces, as the light was reflected in something shining on the face of the form stretched upon that table.

A second glance convinced the surgeon that Ramsey's eyes were open; and at the same instant that this certainty flashed to his mind, the hanged man moved his head slowly round.

Thurston's terror—even if the feeling deserved so emphatic a name—was only momentary; and rushing up to the dissecting board, whereon he placed the light, he examined Ramsey's countenance with earnest attention for a few instants. Yes—he was alive: and the surgeon hastened to remove the cord from his throat: then having procured some restoratives from the pharmacy, he applied them with such good effect that the criminal speedily revived.

But as he lay gasping with the efforts made by the expanding lungs to resume their functions, it suddenly struck Thurston that he was now placed in a most painful position. What was he to do with the man, should he completely recover? To hand him up again to justice were impossible: for such a step would render himself liable to the penalties of the law for having suborned individuals to obtain possession of the body by false and illegitimate means. To turn him adrift into the streets was an act from which even the selfish mind of the surgeon revolted;—and to keep him for any length of time at the house was dangerous as well as being repugnant to his feelings.

These reflections swept through the brain of Thurston as he stood by the side of the table, watching the spasmodic writhings which shook the strong frame of the man who was throwing off the coils of death;—and now consciousness slowly, slowly dawned in upon Ramsey's soul—but only as a feeble lamp, taken into a charnel-house, gradually and one by one lights up the horrors of the place.

First he remembered that he had been doomed to die: next his imagination showed him the terrible paraphernalia of the scaffold—the black beams—the countless crowds around;—then the death-knell seemed again to be tolling in his ears, and his fancy revived the funeral service as it was droned forth by the Ordinary;—and lastly there was the fall of the fatal drop, followed by the tremendous jerk experienced at the throat, and the gush of blood, hot as fire, up into the burning, bursting brain.

Oh! how agonising was the spasm which shook the criminal from the hair of his head to the soles of his feet as the slow operation of a languidly reviving consciousness brought his memory down to this appalling catastrophe;—and a hollow moan of anguish burst from his lips. Then closing his eyes, he seemed to exert all his powers to steady, collect, and settle his thoughts—so that he might assure himself how much was a horrible dream and how much was a hideous reality.

At length, slowly raising his heavy lids again, he fixed his looks searchingly upon the countenance of the medical man; and thence his eyes wandered round the room, as if he were unable to comprehend where he was or what phase of existence, mortal or eternal, had succeeded the agonies produced by the fall of the drop.

But suddenly a light flashed upon his mind; and the convulsion which it caused him to experience unlocked his tongue.

"You are a surgeon," he said, in a faint voice;—and then his eyes were fixed beseechingly upon him to whom those words were addressed.

"Yes: but tranquillise yourself," answered Thurston: "I will not betray you."

A feeble smile moved the lips of Ramsey as this assurance fell upon his ear; and Thurston, lifting the still powerless wretch from the table, carried him into the surgery, where he placed him in an arm-chair before the cheerful fire that was still blazing in the grate. He next administered some hot brandy-and-water; and in another half-hour the criminal was resuscitated beyond all danger of a relapse.

"I will now tell you," said Thurston, "how I propose to act with regard to you. As a matter of course I know who you are and all about you: but prudence requires that you should not know who I am or whereabouts in London this dwelling is situated. It will be impossible to remove you hence for some hours: you will therefore occupy a bed beneath my roof until to-morrow night—during which interval you will be comparatively restored to strength. I will then adopt measures to place you in a condition of security and beyond the reach of danger."

With tears streaming from his eyes did Ramsey pour forth his soul in gratitude to the surgeon who was thus performing—though rather in obedience to necessity than to his own free will—the first generous action which had ever characterised his life.

Circumstances now absolutely required that Mrs Thurston should be made acquainted with what had occurred. She knew that her husband expected a subject that night; and it was not, therefore, very difficult to break the truth to her. For it would have been impossible for the surgeon to lodge Ramsey in any bed-room without her knowledge; and her connivance was also necessary to prevent the domestics from suspecting that a guest was in the house under circumstances so mysterious as to lead them to hazard all kinds of disagreeable conjectures.

He accordingly informed Ramsey of the necessity which compelled him to make a confidant of his wife; and he quitted the surgery to seek her chamber for that purpose.

But scarcely had the door closed behind him, when a thousand wild and terrible ideas rushed to the imagination of the unhappy man whom he left seated in the arm-chair.

Was the alleged reason for the surgeon's absence merely a pretext to lull suspicion while he went out to fetch a constable?—did the medical practitioner intend to consign him back again to the grasp of justice?—should he have to mount the scaffold a second time? Oh! the thoughts were agonising—excruciating; and every instant they acquired a deeper and stronger hold upon the miserable wretch's mind, enfeebled and attenuated as it was by the terrible phase through which his existence had just passed.

It never struck him, in the horrified disorder of that train of reflections which swept across his fevered imagination, that Thurston had no need to resort to subterfuge if he were playing a treacherous part; but that he might have alarmed the house, or have easily bound the resuscitated criminal in his chair until an officer was summoned. No—nothing of all this presented itself to Ramsey's contemplation. His thoughts were in a state of horrible whirlwind: his brain was a delirium.

He must fly—Oh! he must fly from this house of an enemy—from this abode of a man who was about to deliver him up to justice: he must fly—he must fly!

Such were his frantic thoughts;—and despair suddenly nerved him with the strength to execute his purpose. Rising from his seat, he staggered forward a few paces: then he clung to the mantel for support. Again he endeavoured to walk—and this time his step was firmer. He reached the table, on which he leant to steady himself. The decanter of brandy was there; and he poured a quantity down his throat. It seemed to circulate throughout his entire system: he felt that his cheeks were flushing—that his heart was palpitating more quickly—that his legs grew stronger under him. Glancing around, he recognised the door leading from the dissecting-room: then he beheld that by which Thurston had quitted the surgery;—and it consequently struck him that he would try the third. Advancing towards it, he saw a cloak and a hat hanging upon pegs. These articles of apparel he instantly appropriated to his own use; and, still maddened by the excruciating idea that the surgeon was playing him false, he passed into the yard—entered the mews—and thence gained the street.

The fresh air of the night invigorated him: but still he walked languidly—like a man who goes out for the first time on foot after a long and dangerous illness.

Not being well acquainted with London, he knew not where he was; and his thoughts were still too much confused—or rather so harrowed by the horrible fears which had impelled him to quit the surgeon's house—that he paused not to consider whither he should go or what he should do. He reflected not that he was penniless—destitute,—worse, ten thousand times worse than the grovelling beggar in the street; for the meanest mendicant dared show his face in public;—but he—this man fresh from the gibbet—this living proof of the executioner's unskilfulness—this resuscitated subject of the dissecting-room,—Oh! the blackest night was not too dark to veil *his* countenance—to wrap *his* features in its funereal pall!

But of these tremendous truths the wretched creature thought not as he dragged himself along with all the speed which he was capable of exerting. For it was not enough to have escaped from the surgeon's house: it was necessary to avoid pursuit. Such was now the idea that dominated his mind;—and over-taxing his feeble powers, he soon found that he was exhausted—soon felt that he was sinking!

He was now in a vast Square; and even at that late hour, lights were visible through the rich draperies of many windows. Strains of delicious music—the piano and the harp—poured forth their melody in sweet cadences, accompanied by soft voices in harmonious modulation. Roseate, warm, and tender were the scenes of luxury within the mansions where pleasure thus prevailed: chill was the atmosphere without, as the wretched wanderer sate down on a door-step to recruit his shattered energies.

By this time the whirl of his giddy brain was yielding to the presence of graver and more collected thoughts; and he began to perceive how mad—how foolish—how imprudent he had been to quit the surgeon's abode. His late suspicions with regard to that individual now appeared so ridiculous—so monstrously absurd—that he hated and loathed himself for having given way to them.

What was to be done? All the utter friendlessness of his position—all the misery upon which he had rushed headlong by abandoning that hospitable roof—all the perils which he was encountering face to face, passed like a hideous phantasmagorian train before his eyes. The cooler his imagination grew, the stronger was the hold that dismay, perplexity, and horror took upon him. At length, after several minutes' fearful meditation, he suddenly resolved to retrace his steps to the medical man's abode.

Inspired by this idea, he raised himself painfully from the cold stones, and advanced languidly half round the square, endeavouring to recognise the street by which he had entered it. Vain attempt! So severed was his imagination when proceeding thither, that he had taken no note of any particular buildings which might now serve him as landmarks;—and, in total bewilderment, he sank down again at the door of a vast mansion.

Exhausted—spirit-broken—reduced to despair, the wretched being fruitlessly essayed to struggle against the death-like sensations which came over him: the crushing feelings were stronger than his powers of resistance—and he fell back in a deep swoon.

A few minutes afterwards, a splendid equipage dashed up to the front of the dwelling. Down leapt the two tall footmen from behind—the door of the vehicle was opened—the steps were lowered—and the Earl of Desborough, immediately alighting, assisted his charming Countess to descend.

One of the footmen had already discovered Ramsey lying upon the steps.

"The gentleman is not dead, my lord—only in a faint," said the servant, in reply to a hasty question which the Earl put.

"Then, by all means, convey him into the house and have him properly cared for," exclaimed the nobleman; "while some one hastens to fetch our physician."

"He is recovering, my lord—slightly recovering," observed the footman, who, assisted by the other domestic, had raised Ramsey from the cold pavement. "With due deference, I do not think he will require the doctor."

"I am glad of it, for *his* sake—poor gentleman!" said Lord Desborough. "He is evidently a respectable person—and quite a young man too," added the Earl, as the moonbeams now fell on Ramsey's countenance. "Hasten and lift him into the house."

This command was immediately obeyed; and the resuscitated convict was borne to a chamber in the lordly mansion.

The Earl, having wished an affectionate good night to his beautiful Countess, who repaired to her own apartment, followed the domestics to the room whither they had carried the unhappy man. Spirits, essences, and other restoratives were speedily procured: but even before they were applied, Ramsey had recovered sufficient consciousness to enable him to perceive that he was in a handsome chamber and experiencing friendly treatment. Fortunately, his presence of mind so far accompanied the returning reason as to inspire him with a lively sense of the imperious necessity of maintaining an iron control over himself, as an inadvertent word would engender the most dangerous suspicions; and suddenly remembering *that there must be an ominous mark about his neck*—the fatal sign of the halter—he shuddered as he thought of the awful risk of discovery which he had run!

But it luckily happened that the footmen had deposited him in a large easy chair before they even

unfastened the collar of the cloak which he wore; and, as the candles were placed on a high mantel, his neck, though now exposed, was in the shade.

Raising his eyes, and encountering the benevolent looks of the Earl of Desborough, Ramsey murmured some few broken and indistinct words expressive of thanks for the generous treatment which he had received.

"I deserve no gratitude for performing a simple Christian duty," answered the nobleman. "As the Countess of Desborough and myself were returning home from a party, you were discovered in a deep swoon on the steps of our front-door; and common humanity dictated the rest. I hope that you already feel much better."

"Oh! much better, thank God!" exclaimed Ramsey: then, having understood from the Earl's observations who it was that had thus generously succoured him, he added, "My lord, it is more than a mere act of common humanity as the world goes—— But to-morrow, I will explain——"

"Do not attempt a syllable of explanation for the present!" interrupted the nobleman. "Are you sufficiently recovered to be left alone?—or will you have my own valet to assist you to undress and retire to repose?"

"I am sufficiently recovered, my lord——"

"Then good night to you, sir," said the Earl, in a kind tone: and, anxious to escape from any farther expression of thanks on the part of his guest, he quitted the apartment, followed by the two footmen.

CHAPTER LXVII

THE RESUSCITATED.

When Ramsey awoke at a late hour in the morning, he was some time before he could so far collect his thoughts as to remember all that had occurred during the past night.

He found himself lying in a sumptuous bed; and, on putting aside the curtains, he perceived that he was in a spacious and elegant chamber, fitted up with every attention to the most luxurious comfort.

No longer by sluggish degrees—but with whirlwind rapidity—the whole train of truths swept in unto his startled soul;—and remembering that the accursed mark must be upon his neck—a mark which perhaps would linger there for many days to come—he hurriedly raised his hand to the collar of his shirt. It was just as he had disposed it on retiring to rest; and, moreover, he recollected that he had fastened the door in order to prevent any one from entering the room and observing him while he slept.

Tranquillised by a conviction of security at least for the present, the resuscitated criminal was enabled to reflect with calmness upon his position.

He was in a house where he had received and was still enjoying the most generous hospitality: but it would be necessary to volunteer some explanation regarding himself. A tale must be invented—a name must be assumed. These were not difficult matters with one who had grown so inured to duplicity and deception as Ramsey; and in a very short time he had a plausible history ready to narrate when occasion should demand.

The time-piece upon the mantel showed him that it was eleven o'clock; and the light of day streaming through the window-curtains made him aware that it was the forenoon.

Rising from his bed, he unlocked the door; having done which, he retired to his couch again. For he not only felt weak and feeble still—but it likewise suited his purpose to represent himself to be so much exhausted as to afford an apology for remaining at the Earl of Desborough's mansion at least until night-fall. Nevertheless, it was equally requisite, on the other hand, that he should not appear so unwell as to induce the Earl to send for a medical man; inasmuch as some accident might reveal the fatal mark on his neck to the keen eye of professional experience.

Shortly after eleven, some one knocked at the door and Ramsey invited the person to enter. A footman made his appearance, with the compliments of the Earl, who was anxious to know how his guest had slept and how he felt.

"Present my most grateful thanks to your noble master," said the resuscitated, "and inform him that I am considerably better; but that, with his lordship's permission, I will repose myself for a few hours longer."

The domestic bowed and retired; and shortly afterwards another servant entered the room, bearing a massive silver tray, on which were spread the materials for a luxurious breakfast.

When again left alone, Ramsey did justice to the meal; and he shuddered as he reflected that the last time food had passed his lips was within an hour of *the fatal eight o'clock* when he had ascended the steps leading to the scaffold!

Shortly after he had finished his breakfast, the resuscitated received a visit from the Earl of Desborough, who shook him kindly by the hand, and expressed the joy which he experienced on finding him in so improved a condition. For the nobleman had perceived at the first glance by Ramsey's air and demeanour that he was a gentleman—an impression which was speedily afterwards confirmed by the few words which had fallen from his lips when he was conveyed to that chamber as already detailed. The Earl therefore treated him with a suitable courtesy; and, taking a chair near the bed-side, he said, "I beg that you will make my house your home until your full and complete recovery; and if you wish to communicate with your friends, my servants are at your disposal."

Now was the time for Ramsey to narrate his already well-concocted history.

"In again expressing my deep gratitude to your lordship," he said, "for the kindness I have experienced at your hands, I feel bound to inform you who I am, and under what circumstances I became reduced to the deplorable condition in which your lordship found me last night—or rather, at an early hour this morning. My name is Gustavus Wakefield—and my father was a West India planter, residing in Jamaica. I am an only son, and was brought up in all the indolence which characterises the existence of the wealthy in that clime. Ten months ago my father died, leaving his affairs in a most distracted state—so that when all his liabilities were duly and honourably settled, I found myself penniless. Happy, however, in having rescued the memory of a beloved parent from the stigma which would have attached itself to his name had his debts continued unliquidated, I embarked six weeks ago for England, in the hope that a good education, un-

exceptionable letters of introduction, and a resolution to do justice to any situation which I might be fortunate enough to procure, would enable me to vanquish an adverse fate and fortune and gain my bread. Yesterday morning I set foot for the first time in the British metropolis; and I resolved to devote one day to viewing the different attractions of this mighty city ere I delivered my letters and sought for employment. Having therefore procured a lodging in a house which I considered to be respectable, I left my small portmanteau there, and sallied forth to render myself better acquainted with London. In the evening I returned to my lodging, exhausted with many hours' rambling; and sleep soon visited my eyes. But I was presently awakened by the most terrific screaming, fighting, and quarrelling; and hastily dressing myself, I rushed down stairs to protect the females who were being ill-treated. The door of a room stood open; and in that apartment I beheld an orgie of so disgusting a nature as to convince me in a moment that I had been cruelly deceived in respect to the character of the house. Interference with the brawlers I perceived to be useless; but I resolved not to remain another moment in a place whose very atmosphere was contamination. I therefore hurried up stairs—threw my portmanteau over my shoulder—and abruptly quitted the abode of infamy, although I had paid a week's rent in advance. Under the impression that I should find some tavern open, where I could take up my quarters, I hastened along—threading street after street—but observing that all the houses were closed. At length I grew so wearied that I was compelled to sit down and rest myself. Two respectable-looking men—at least so far as I could judge of them by the uncertain moonlight—accosted me; and I ingenuously told them all that had happened. They expressed their commiseration, and offered to conduct me to a decent tavern where I could obtain a bed for the rest of the night. Cordially thanking them for their proposal, I hesitated not to follow them. One of the men, noticing that I was much exhausted, insisted on carrying my portmanteau; and though I felt ashamed to give him so much trouble, I was compelled to yield to what appeared his generous solicitude. We walked on for some little distance, and at length entered a large Square. The man who had the portmanteau was a few paces in advance: his friend was by my side. All on a sudden this latter villain threw himself upon me—flung me violently upon the steps leading to a house-door—and rifled me of my purse and pocket-book. The resistance I made was feeble and ineffectual: for I was nearly stunned by the maltreatment I had received. Nevertheless, I *did* struggle with the ruffian to the utmost of my ability: but having succeeded in robbing me, he dashed me back again with such savage ferocity on the stones that I remember nothing more until I was aroused to consciousness beneath your lordship's roof."

Ramsey ceased; and with so much apparent frankness had he told his story, that the Earl of Desborough was completely deceived by it.

"It is a narrative the concluding incidents of which are unfortunately of no rare occurrence," said the nobleman. "Villanies of that class are more common than good deeds in this metropolis, Mr. Wakefield."

"But the laws—the magistrates—the constables, my lord," exclaimed Ramsey, with a well feigned simplicity, "will procure me the restoration of my property."

"There is not the least chance of recovering it," replied the Earl.

"My God! what will become of me?" ejaculated the hypocrite, clasping his hands together. "All that I possessed in the world was contained in the portmanteau and the purse; and in the pocket-book were the letters of introduction which I had brought with me from Jamaica!" he added, assuming a tone of deep despondency.

"Tranquillise yourself, Mr. Wakefield," said the nobleman: "you shall not leave this house penniless or friendless. I am not disposed to do things by halves; and your history—your manner—your language, all convince me that you are a deserving person. The honourable way in which you impoverished yourself to pay your father's debts, must enlist the sympathies of every humane heart in your favour: the precipitation with which you fled from a disreputable house led to the results which actually seem a punishment inflicted on virtue. But it may perhaps prove fortunate for you in the long run that you should have thus bitterly commenced your experience of London life: for the unpleasant adventure of last night has thrown you in my way—and I will not desert you."

It was easy for Ramsey to weep tears of joy—easy to express his thanks with an appearance of the most grateful ardour; and the generous, unsuspecting, kind-hearted nobleman was thereby confirmed in the good opinion which he had already entertained of his guest.

"You shall pass a few days beneath this roof, Mr. Wakefield," he said; "and in the interval we will talk over the different plans that I may suggest for your contemplation. I shall then be better able to judge of your views—your capacities—your inclinations; and my purse and interest shall alike be placed at your disposal."

"Ah! my lord," exclaimed Ramsey, "such goodness is indeed unprecedented. But I will not intrude many hours longer upon your lordship's hospitality. Naturally of retired habits—loving seclusion—and little acquainted with the manners and customs of English life, I should only render myself ridiculous by my awkwardness, which would likewise humiliate me and increase my embarrassment."

"At all events, Mr. Wakefield, the Countess and myself dine alone to-day," said the Earl; "and you will favour us with your company, if you be well enough to rise from your couch towards the evening. That you shall remain in this house until I can settle some plan for your benefit, I am determined: but whether you will keep your own room or join us at our table, shall be left to your discretion."

Having thus spoken, the Earl of Desborough took a temporary leave of the fictitious Mr. Wakefield, and repaired to the apartment of the Countess to recite to her ladyship all that their guest had told him.

An hour later the nobleman's valet entered Ramsey's room with a change of linen and other necessaries of the toilette; and soon after the domestic had retired, the criminal rose from his couch.

Fortunately he possessed a good suit of clothes—the very same in which he had appeared upon the

scaffold: and he was therefore enabled to attire himself in a becoming manner. A natural sentiment of vanity prompted him to devote considerable attention to his toilette; and the paleness which lingered on his cheeks gave him an interesting expression of countenance.

It was about five o'clock when his toilette was thus completed; and soon afterwards the Earl came to conduct him to the drawing-room, where he was introduced to Lady Desborough.

The Countess, as credulous as her husband in respect to the tale which Ramsey had so skilfully invented, received him with more courtesy—or rather, in a more frank and friendly manner than she would have evinced towards an utter stranger under ordinary circumstances; and, believing that her guest was totally unaccustomed to European habits, she endeavoured to place him at his ease, and divest him of all feelings of painful restraint. A well-bred woman, when amiable likewise, can speedily accomplish this: moreover, Ramsey's first semblance of embarrassment was thrown off with such artful gradiency, that Eleanor was enabled to flatter herself on having succeeded "in drawing him out" and making him feel himself at home.

In the story which he related to the Earl, he had fixed upon Jamaica as his birth-place and as the scene of his residence until within the last ten months, because he had read much concerning that island. He had relatives there; and from them had he been in the habit of receiving frequent letters, which, in amicable communicativeness, were wont to give long and detailed particulars of the manners, customs, and modes of life that signalised the planters. He was therefore enabled to converse with readiness and fluency on those subjects; and his observations were made with an appearance of all that inartificial ease which denotes the eye-witness of the things related.

His voice was particularly agreeable—his language excellent; and there was a melancholy in his tone, his manner, and his countenance which rivetted the interest of those who already compassionated the misfortunes which they believed him to have experienced.

Besides, he was handsome—very handsome;—and Eleanor could not help thinking so as she conversed with him. Indeed, she had not been two hours in his society ere she caught herself reflecting that he was one of the most agreeable men she had ever encountered in her life.

Oh! had some invisible spirit whispered in her ear that those features had been convulsed in the agonies of strangulation by the accursed halter of the hangman—that fierce spasmodic writhings had passed through that slender, symmetrical, and elegant form, as it quivered between the black beam above and the yawning drop beneath—and that the fascinating Gustavus Wakefield was none other than Philip Ramsey, the resuscitated convict,—Oh! how speedily would the smiles have fled from her charming cheeks—how loathingly she would have recoiled even though it were but the hem of her garment touching the clothes of the wretch—how full of unutterable horror would her soul have been at the mere thought of having met him face to face!

This shows, then, how strong is the force of imagination—how powerful is the influence of a prejudice. For now—behold Lady Desborough leaning upon the arm of Ramsey as he escorts her to the dining-room;—and she is already something more than contented with her companion—she is well pleased with him!

The dinner passed away;—and, after Eleanor had withdrawn, the Earl and Ramsey sate conversing upon various topics for a short time. But as the latter dared not indulge in deep potations, his head being still weak and his frame nervous,—and as the nobleman was habitually temperate,—they speedily rejoined the Countess in the drawing-room. There coffee was served; and the discourse was continued until a little after eleven, when Ramsey rose—bade his noble host and hostess good night—and withdrew to his own chamber.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE DEVIL'S PUNCH-BOWL.

On the road from London to Portsmouth, and at no great distance from Petersfield, there is a deep valley or rather precipitate hollow, having no outlet between any of the circumjacent heights: so that it might be filled to the very brim with water. The country in the immediate neighbourhood was particularly wild and dismal at the time of which we are writing; and it is a gloomy and sinister-looking spot even at the present day

The main road winds round a portion of the circumference of the vast hollow; and a stone on that side of the route which is next to the valley, marks the place where a horrible murder was committed many years ago upon the person of a sailor, whose corpse was thrown over the low embankment into the abyss. The assassins were discovered—condemned to death—and executed on the theatre of their crime. There they hung in chains for a long time—their blackened corpses scaring the lonely traveller, and the creaking of their irons sounding horribly in the ears of the passengers by chaise or coach.

From days immemorial the valley of which we are speaking has been known as the Devil's Punch-Bowl.

But we must give some more explicit idea of the place as it was in the year 1795, whereof our tale at present treats.

All around, the sides of this immense hollow were scarped and precipitate—the ruggedness of the surface being concealed by thick furze, brambles, and rank grass. The road was narrow—separated only from the abyss by a small bank, scarcely two feet in height; so that a tipsy man or a wayfarer ignorant of the precise features of the locality, might easily fall over, on a dark night, into the yawning profundity. Over the other side of the road frowned a portion of the hill out of which the route itself had been cut, and which rose in some places to a height of twenty or thirty feet. Not a human habitation was within a couple of miles of the Devil's Punch-Bowl in those days; lonely, sombre, and ravine-like, even in the day-time its aspect inspired gloomy thoughts in the breast of the most daring traveller and as the stage-coaches wound their way about the semi-circumference which the road occupied—as if passing along the rim of a tremendous basin—the voices of the passengers would be suddenly hushed and they would look forth from the windows of the vehicles, with a kind of superstitious awe, into the

depth or far across the yawning abyss into which the steeds, if they took fright, might plunge the whole equipage.

Yes—with superstitious awe, we say: because many, and often fearful, were the tales which were told of deeds of violence committed in that place,—robberies and murders—rapes upon poor benighted female wanderers—and infanticides perpetrated by unmarried mothers who would travel thither from distances even of many miles in order to dispose of the living evidences of their shame. There were histories of terrible accidents told, too, concerning the Devil's Punch-Bowl,—how coaches had been precipitated into the abyss—how poor pedlars, ignorant of the gulf that lay beyond the low embankment, had stepped over it in the depth of night, with the idea of snatching a few hours' repose in a fresh green field, and had thus fallen into the eternal sleep of death—and how horses had stumbled and gone down with their riders to the bottom of the infernal pit!

Many, and varied, and horrible, therefore, were the legends belonging to the Devil's Punch-Bowl;—and superstition had not failed to lend its aid in order to enhance the terrors of the place. In the deep midnight, it was said, strange and spectral forms were seen hovering on the brink of the abyss, or moving about in its vast depths,—shapes so grim and hideous that they would exist ever after in the memories of those who beheld them, as vividly as if impressed with red-hot searing iron on the brain,—terrible apparitions, to gaze on which only for a single instant were to unnerve the bravest man until the last moment of his existence. Nor was this all. For the same superstition which propagated those tales, likewise declared that once in every year—on a certain day—or rather, at deep midnight—the Enemy of Mankind himself and all his crew held their infernal orgies at that place. Then—while the moon veiled herself with the murky clouds and the stars sank shudderingly behind the sable pall of darkness—while the wind moaned, and the owl hooted, and the furze rustled ominously—and while the wings of the bat whirred through the intense darkness,—then, in the midst of one of the long, long nights of winter, would Satan and his fiends assemble round the hollow to enjoy their hellish revel. And it was said that, when the Arch-Demon waved his mighty wand, a spring of pitchy blackness would issue forth from the bottom of the ravine; and higher—and higher—and higher would swell the sable tide, till it reached the brim,—so that the denizens of Satan's Kingdom, thus gathered there in awful congress, might quaff deep draughts of the infernal nectar, whose taste was of human blood! Nay, more—so minutely had superstition elaborated all the grim details of the tremendous orgie, that it forgot not to declare how the cups whence the fiends drank were made of dead men's skulls—how the revellers danced frantically round and round their vast punch-bowl, uttering hideous cries and shouts of maniac laughter—and how the whole terrible phantasmagoria disappeared suddenly, melting into thin air, the moment the cock crew at the first glimmering of dawn.

But taking all these tales and legends for what they are worth, the huge hollow which we have attempted to describe was in sooth a sinister-looking, murderous, cut-throat place.

It was on the fourth evening after the incidents related in the previous chapter, that the Magsman muffled up in his great rough coat, and grasping his club, began to clamber down the steep sides of the Devil's Punch-Bowl.

The clock of the nearest village had struck nine as he passed it some twenty minutes previously; the sky was heavy with dark clouds, which were however broken sufficiently to allow the moon to send her beams faintly forth;—and the wind was rustling amidst the furze to which the Magsman clung as he lowered himself into the yawning abyss.

Soon afterwards another individual, who had approached the hollow from a different direction, began to descend into it: then, in less than ten minutes, a third—a fourth—a fifth—and a sixth,—all coming from separate quarters and at short intervals,—hurried downward to the same point.

At last the whole six met at the bottom of the abyss; and six greater villains had assuredly never assembled before in so appropriate a spot, or in any place with so suitable a name.

The first, as already stated, was Joe the Magsman: then there were Miles the Buzgloak, Dick the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand;—and the party was made up by two other men of an equally desperate character.

"Well, here we are punctual, according to the appointment made the night before last in London," said Warren, throwing himself upon the ground, the others following his example. "To tell you the truth, I'm rather tired after my day's walk. Twenty-five miles I've done since breakfast this morning."

"But you ain't too tired to act, though," observed Dick the Tramper.

"I should rather think not indeed," returned the Magsman. "There's something I'm about to pour down my throat that would enable me to face and fight the devil himself."

"Ah! that's brandy you mean," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand. "So much the better. I've got my flask filled to. Does anybody want some?"

It appeared that each individual was equally well furnished; and so the offer was declined.

"Now do you know exactly, old feller," demanded Miles the Buzgloak of the Magsman, "at what o'clock we may expect the jarvey to pass along the road?"

"Why, at about twelve, I should say—certainly not sooner," was the reply.

"Yes—but how do you judge?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand. "Because we know nothink at all about it."

"You've just the same means of judging, as I have," returned the Magsman savagely.

"And how's that?"

"Why—by knowing at what o'clock the jarvey was to leave London this morning, to be sure. Take that time first of all—next you know how many miles the Punch-Bowl is from town—and then you may reckon that the rattle-trap jogs on at about six miles an hour: well—that shows you that we may expect it between twelve and one."

"Quite right, Mr. Warren," said the Kinchin-Grand. "And so we have time to smoke our pipes and rest ourselves a bit. Well—that's a comfort: for we've all walked pretty decently yesterday and to-day—'specially each one taking a different direction, though all coming at last to the same point."

"Ah! the Government little thinks what kind of

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chaps its people will have to deal with, to-night," observed Dick the Tramper. "There can't be a suspicion of what's going to take place: 'cos there's only eight in the secret—and six on us is here."

"Eight!" ejaculated the Kinchin-Grand. "Who's the other two?"

"Why, the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll, to be sure," replied the Tramper.

"Oh! ah! I forgot the women," said the Kinchin-Grand, lighting his pipe. "By the bye, Mr. Warren, you talked just now about fighting Old Nick: do you know that they say he has his boozings here once in every year—and a precious set out it is too, by all accounts."

"Why! I'm blowed if you don't half believe it!" exclaimed the Magsman, who was likewise puffing a short clay filled with very strong tobacco.

"No—I'll be hanged if I do," answered the Kinchin-Grand: "or else I wouldn't be here to-night. What I undertakes, I likes to go through with; and as I shouldn't go through with this here affair if I was afeard, I shouldn't have undertook it in that case. But, I say, are we all armed as agreed upon the night afore last?"

"A pair o' pistols and a stout club for each individual?" added Miles the Buzgloak.

The responses were satisfactory on this head; and the men continued to chatter, smoke, and drink until the Magsman's watch, being consulted by means of placing the glowing bowl of his pipe near the dial so as to throw the light upon it, informed the company that it was verging rapidly upon twelve.

"Now, then, my lads," exclaimed Joe Warren; "we must prepare for action. Put away your pipes—take another swill at the bingo-flask—and follow me."

The night, as it deepened, had grown more gloomy and menacing: but still the storm with

which the clouds seemed laden, burst not forth—and still from between the black masses piled one above another on the face of heaven, the straggling rays of the moon peeped timidly forth. The wind had risen to a somewhat higher key—and the air was intensely cold: but the ruffians, heated as they were with brandy and excited by the object which they had in view, felt not its chilling influence. Silently they now pursued their way, the Magsman acting as captain and as guide; and as those six forms moved from the bottom of the Punch-Bowl towards the acclivity on the summit of which the main road ran, they appeared to be fiends of darkness in the faint and uncertain light of the moon.

On gaining the top, or brim, of the vast hollow, the party was divided into two sections. Miles the Buzgloak, Dick the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand were ordered by the Magsman to conceal themselves amidst the furze which the low embankment overlooked; while Joe Warren himself, accompanied by the two men completing the band, crossed the road and ascended the portion of the hill which commanded the route.

Being thus disposed of, the ruffians lay in wait patiently and silently.

At length the rumbling of wheels and the noise of horses' hoofs met their ears. They all listened attentively: the sounds came from that quarter whence they were expected;—and there could be no doubt that this was the vehicle whose presence was the object of the night's adventure.

In a few moments two lights, glancing like meteors, began to emerge as it were from the obscurity; and the progress of the carriage along the road on the brim of the Punch-Bowl was thus marked by its lanterns.

On came the vehicle: and now it was near enough for the ruffians who lay in ambush, to observe that it was a long hearse-like concern, drawn by four horses, and with the driver seated on a high box in front.

An escort of four dragoons guarded the ponderous machine—two riding on one side, and two on the other.

In this manner the cavalcade was jogging along, when, all on a sudden, the Magsman leapt from the overhanging hill upon the roof of the vehicle; and, hurling the driver from his seat into the middle of the road, he sprang upon the back of one of the wheel-horses, and cut all the traces in a moment.

At the same instant that the Magsman thus took the initiative, his two companions threw themselves from the overhanging eminence upon the couple of dragoons who rode on that side of the vehicle: while the two mounted soldiers riding on the other side were as suddenly assailed by the Buzgloak, the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand.

Shots were fired—and a severe conflict took place.

Away sped the four horses which the Magsman had freed from the vehicle: frightened by the report of the pistols, they galloped along the road, their thundering hoofs raising every echo in that vast abyss the brim of which the terrified animals were thus madly skirting.

But all that we have as yet described was the work of scarcely a minute; and the proceedings of the Magsman were executed with wondrous rapidity.

Having cut the traces and thus rendered the vehicle stationary by emancipating the horses, this desperate individual passed like lightning underneath the ponderous machine; and with one blow of his club he knocked off a massive padlock which fastened a door at the back of the huge hearse-like carriage.

The vehicle instantaneously vomited forth its contents in the shape of a dozen convicts, heavily ironed; and amidst the very foremost, the Magsman had the satisfaction of recognising, by the flickering moonlight, the countenances of his friends Briggs and the Big Beggarman.

Meantime the four dragoons and the five villains opposed to them had maintained a desperate struggle on either side of the vehicle: but the release of the convicts decided the fortune of the fray in a very few moments. The soldiers were made prisoners without any loss of life; and they, as well as the driver of the van, were bound securely with strong cords and deposited, powerless, beneath the overhanging hill.

Then, in the sheer spirit of wanton mischief, the whole gang of desperadoes—liberators as well as convicts—seized upon the carriage—wheeled it to the edge of the Punch-Bowl—and hurled it over the low embankment into the abyss.

Down—down thundered the ponderous machine, rolling over and over with rapid concussions that sounded like the sharp and successive reports of a brisk cannonade: down—down it went, tearing away furze, brambles, and rank grass,—and ultimately dashing to pieces at the bottom of the Punch-Bowl.

Satisfied with the work of destruction, and tauntingly wishing the four dragoons and the driver a good night, the party hastened away from the scene of this exploit; and having gained a neighbouring wood, the Magsman produced a quantity of files and pick-locks from one of his capacious pockets. By means of these implements the convicts soon removed their fetters; and we need hardly observe that great was their joy at this triumphant and unexpected deliverance—for not even the Beggarman and Briggs had been previously aware of their friends' determination to attempt their rescue.

CHAPTER LXIX.

PAULINE AND GABRIEL.

It was eleven o'clock on Sunday morning; and Pauline Clarendon was seated alone in a small parlour at the house which her father had taken about five weeks previously in Cavendish Square.

The young lady was dressed in an elegant but unassuming style; and the dark colour of her gown set off to the utmost advantage her pure and stainless complexion. Her deep brown hair, so rich with its natural gloss, showered in a myriad ringlets over her well-shaped shoulders; and her neck, grandly white and gently arching, resembled a polished ivory pillar against that flood of luxuriant curls which swept her back.

Upon her countenance a soft melancholy rested: and, although the light of heaven appeared to illume the depths of her eloquent blue eyes, yet her features expressed a certain pensiveness which imparted to her entire appearance an ineffably charming air of reflective sweetness.

From the reverie into which the lovely girl had fallen, she was presently aroused by a double knock at the front door; and starting from her seat, she threw a glance at the mirror over the mantel-piece. A smile of satisfaction played for a moment upon

her lips—for the faithful glass, reflecting her beauteous countenance, told her that she was charming: then, ashamed at the feeling of vanity to which she had thus yielded for an instant, she returned to her chair—her features at the same time assuming a somewhat severe expression.

But, oh! for Pauline to wear an angry look was not an easy task: it was merely Venus attiring herself in the armour of Minerva;—and though she might fix upon her brow the helmet of the Goddess of War, yet beneath the shade of the vizor those were still the eyes of the Goddess of Love and Beauty which looked forth!

The door opened—and Lord Florimel was announced.

Pauline rose, and proffered him her hand: but when he made a movement to convey it to his lips, she immediately withdrew it—and, indicating a chair, bade him be seated.

"In the first place I thank you, Pauline, for granting me this interview—*at last*," he said, in a tone of soft remonstrance.

"I declined to accompany my father and sister to church, on purpose that I might see you alone," said Pauline. "But I scarcely know why we should have met at all—since we must part presently to encounter each other no more save upon terms of mere acquaintanceship."

"And yet it is hard that I should be condemned for a crime of which I am totally innocent," observed Florimel, with a voice and manner expressive of vexation. "As God is my judge——"

"Add not perjury to your other offences, Gabriel," interrupted Pauline. "And now give me your attention. That I have loved you well—fondly—sincerely," she continued in a tremulous tone, "you are aware: but I am not so weak and silly a girl as to espouse a man whose infidelities will render me wretched. I appreciate all the honour which you—a great nobleman—did me at the time by the offer of your hand; and your conduct was the more generous, inasmuch as I was then in a far humbler situation than at present. Had you remained faithful to me, Gabriel," she proceeded, the pearly tears now trickling down her beauteous cheeks, "I should have esteemed myself the happiest woman in the world; and, on becoming your wife, my whole and sole care would have been to convince you that I was worthy of your affection. I do not say that I should have given you a love greater than any which human heart ever knew before: but certainly it would have been outrivalled by no devotion of which woman is capable. Bright and glorious, Gabriel, were the fairy scenes of happiness which my imagination had woven; and in that wild and romantic castle-building my soul was steeped in a fount of indescribable bliss. But gone are those visions—vanished are those sweet dreams; and all is a dreary waste where the gorgeous structures raised by my fervent fancy so lately stood. We shall part—but on my side it will be in sorrow, and not with anger. I give you back your vows and pledges—I release you from all your solemn promises—in the same way that you must emancipate me from mine."

And, as Pauline uttered these last words, she averted her countenance to hide the tears that were now streaming down it.

"My God! are things so serious as this?" exclaimed Florimel, cruelly tortured. "I have listened to you, my beloved Pauline—not with patience—but in respectful silence; and now I implore you to give an attentive ear to me in my turn. Interrupt me not, therefore, when I take God to witness that you have wronged me with your suspicions—that, although circumstances were against me and appearances unfavourable——"

"Oh! if I could only be convinced of the truth of this assertion!" ejaculated Pauline, looking up and smiling through her tears.

It was Venus laying aside the martial sternness of Minerva, and becoming the Goddess of Love and Beauty once again!

"Yes—I *can* convince you—I *will* convince you!" said the young nobleman; and, taking a letter from his pocket, he handed it to Pauline, saying, "The girl whom you encountered as she issued from my house, was the bearer of that missive!"

Miss Clarendon cast her eyes over the billet, and read the contents as follow:—

"What think you, my dear friend, of the bearer of this? You are a naughty man for not coming to see me Pray explain this absence of several days—not by letter, but in person. I shall expect you to sup with me on any evening you may choose to appoint; and if it be agreeable to you, I can promise that the bearer, Miss Camilla Morton, shall be of the party. All that you need now say to her is that you will attend to the note."

"Ah! Florimel, I have indeed wronged you!" exclaimed Pauline, throwing herself into his arms, and weeping upon his bosom. "I now perceive that the young woman was a stranger to you—that she was sent by some vile person to tempt you—— But wherefore did you not give me this explanation at first?" she demanded, the thought suddenly striking her: and, withdrawing her arms from about his neck, she gazed anxiously—almost searchingly—upon his countenance.

"Will you not at once banish this unpleasant incident from your mind, dearest Pauline—without asking me for any farther explanations?" said Florimel, his voice and manner alike denoting that he was now troubled and embarrassed.

"If you love me, Gabriel," she answered, in a tone of mild reproach, "you will completely and fully relieve my mind from any disagreeable impressions which remain upon it. Once more, then, do I ask you why you did not at once forward me this note, to convince me that the young person whom I encountered was a stranger, and not a familiar acquaintance?"

"Pauline, I will be candid with you," returned the nobleman, taking a seat upon a sofa and compelling her to place herself by his side: "I was afraid you would recognise the handwriting in that note."

"I never saw it before," said Pauline, snatching up the billet from the table where she had flung it, and studying it with attention.

"So much the better," exclaimed Florimel. "And now ask me nothing more, I beseech you."

"This mystery distracts me!" cried the young lady. "If you have done naught of which you are ashamed, why shroud a portion of the incident in so suspicious a secrecy? Tell me everything, I conjure you! And first, wherefore should you have fancied that I might recognise the handwriting?"

"Because I feared—I dreaded——that is, I thought it probable that the person who penned this

note might have had occasion at some time to write to your sister," said Florimel, cruelly embarrassed.

"Write to my sister!" ejaculated Pauline, in amazement. "Surely you cannot fancy that so vile a woman as the authoress of this letter must be, could hold any correspondence with Octavia? O Gabriel! It is not because my sister has shown every proof of confidence towards him whom she loves—it is not because she is already his wife in the eyes of heaven, though not in the estimation of the world, that you should think so injuriously of her!"

"No—no—I was mistaken—I was wrong!" cried Florimel. "And now let us change the discourse, my beloved Pauline——"

"We cannot abandon the topic in its present state," said Miss Clarendon, firmly. "Who is the woman that wrote this letter, and whom you suspected to be in communication with Octavia?"

"I dare not—must not——" stammered Florimel, with increasing embarrassment.

"Oh! a light breaks in upon me!" suddenly ejaculated Pauline. "It is at the house of Mrs. Brace, the milliner, that Octavia meets her lover—— and you are in Mrs. Brace's confidence——you told Octavia so when you accompanied her home on that memorable morning —— Yes—everything confirms my suspicions——and it is this same Mrs. Brace who is the vile authoress of that most vile letter! My God! what will become of poor Octavia? She is deceived —— I can read it all ——"

And, covering her face with her hands, Pauline wept bitterly.

"What have I done?—what mischief have I made?" cried Florimel, starting from his seat, and beginning to pace to and fro in an agitated manner. 'To set myself right with you, Pauline, I have engendered the most terrible suspicions in your mind——"

"It was my fault, Gabriel—dear Gabriel!" she exclaimed, springing towards him and throwing her arms about his neck. "Yes—it was my fault," she continued, in a voice broken with deep sobs: "I compelled you to speak out—I extracted the truth from you——and I appreciate all the delicacy which prompted you to remain silent —— Oh! my poor Octavia—I fear that you are deceived—betrayed—lost—undone: for no honourable man could place the woman whom he intends to make his wife in contact with a wretch so vile as this Mrs. Brace!"

And Pauline sank, convulsed with grief, upon the sofa.

"Tranquillise yourself, my beloved—in the name of God! tranquillise yourself," said Florimel, adopting his most soothing tone. "All may not be so bad as you fancy —— Octavia's intended husband may not be acquainted with the real character of this Mrs. Brace——And remember, dearest, that amongst men the milliner's private avocation is not looked upon ——"

"Do not advance anything in extenuation of the wicked woman," interrupted Pauline, with impassioned tone and manner. "I will forget that *you* ever knew her—that *you* ever made her services available to your own purposes: for that such has been the case, is too evident, Gabriel ——Nevertheless, all *that* shall be forgotten, I say, if you will now lend me your assistance on behalf of my poor deluded sister. And remember, dear Gabriel," continued the sweet girl, in a tone of earnest entreaty,—"remember that when you become *my* husband, Octavia is thereby made *your* sister also—and as a brother you must be jealous of her honour. To her father—her natural protector—all this unhappy business cannot be made known: but as you are already well acquainted with every detail—indeed, as it was from your own lips that I received the first hint respecting Octavia's love and the connexion which she had formed so hastily—it is for *you* to unravel the whole, and ascertain who this Mr. Harley really is."

"Mr. Harley!—is that the name?" inquired Florimel, who now heard it for the first time; and at the same instant he recollected having been informed by Mrs. Brace that Octavia's lover was a man of rank and shortly to be married, but that he had not the slightest intention of espousing the elder Miss Clarendon.

"Yes—his name is Harley," repeated Pauline. "But I will show you a portrait which bears the most striking resemblance to him—for I myself have seen this Mr. Harley, and I can vouch for the marvellous accuracy of the likeness."

Thus speaking, the young lady wiped away her tears; and, opening a portfolio which lay upon the table, she displayed to the view of the astounded Lord Florimel the portrait of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

For nearly a minute the young nobleman gazed in speechless wonderment upon the print: but at length raising his eyes, and turning them slowly towards Pauline, he was shocked to perceive that her countenance was ghastly pale—that her looks were wild and haggard—and that the colour had even fled from those lips which, naturally of such a delicious coral, were now almost as white as the pearls beneath.

"My God! what is the matter?" exclaimed Florimel, extending his arms towards her;—and she sank, suddenly convulsed with sobs, upon his bosom.

He seated himself on a chair—he took her upon his knees—he strained her passionately in a fond embrace—he kissed away the tears that now rained down her cheeks, to which the excitement of bitter anguish brought back a crimson glow.

"Sweetest—dearest Pauline," he murmured in her ears,—"tranquillise yourself, I implore you! Never—never did I love you so ardently—so sincerely—so devotedly, as at this moment. My God! tell me what I can do for you, angelic girl: but dry those tears—subdue these rending sobs, I conjure—I entreat you! Yes—I will behave as a brother towards Octavia—because it now rests with yourself when I shall demand *your* hand of Mr. Clarendon and lead you to the altar. As your husband, Pauline, I shall acquire the right to vindicate the honour of Octavia;—and you have only to breathe your commands, in order to see them executed!"

"Gabriel, your words console me—and these generous assurances which they convey render me as proud of you as I was already fond," said Pauline, of her own accord approaching her lips to his own and returning the fervent kisses which he imprinted thereon: then, gently disengaging herself from his embrace, and taking a seat by his side,—but placing one of her fair hands in familiar and artless confidence upon his shoulder,—she observed, while passing her handkerchief across her eyes, "You have now seen the portrait of Octavia's lover; and if Mr. Harley be not the Prince of Wales himself, then never was resemblance more wonderful."

"I am astonished—bewildered!" exclaimed Flo-

rimel, really uncertain to what opinion he should fix his belief. "But there are strange likenesses in the world," he said, in a musing tone; "and that recent trial of which Sir Richard Stamford appeared as a prosecutor or a witness——"

"I have thought of the same incident," observed Pauline; "and sometimes I have fancied that Octavia's lover may be the Prince—at others that he is this very Sir Richard Stamford—and then again that he is the Mr. Harley whom he represents himself——. But you, Gabriel," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, and speaking with animation, "will clear up this mystery?"

"Give me your commands, my beloved—and I will execute them," said Florimel, who, in the enthusiasm of the adoration which he now experienced towards the charming Pauline, was prepared to go through fire and water to serve her.

"I must tell you, Gabriel," she resumed, fixing upon him a look of the tenderest gratitude, "that Octavia is herself oppressed with serious misgivings on the point which we are discussing. She strives to conceal them, poor girl—she buoys herself up with hope to the extent of her powers; and she does not dare trust her tongue to reveal all her doubts, and fears, and suspicions to me. But, alas! I can read the nature of her thoughts—and I know that there are times when she is unhappy—very unhappy. For her sake, Gabriel, must we at once devise the means to clear up the mystery which surrounds Mr. Harley——"

"Frankly—candidly—unreservedly do I now tell you, my beloved," interrupted the young nobleman, "that I do not believe this Mr. Harley is the person he represents himself to be. You place such implicit reliance upon me, that I should be unworthy of your love and your confidence if I did not manifest the same ingenuousness towards you. So noble is your nature, that you compel me to view duplicity and deceit with abhorrence; and I declare most solemnly that I will henceforth yield to that benign influence which your own character sheds upon me."

"Gabriel, I adore you!" exclaimed Pauline, throwing herself once more into his arms and embracing him affectionately. "However wild your past life may have been—however deeply you have plunged into pleasure and dissipation—your conduct of this morning is an atonement for it all! Yes—I adore you, Gabriel: for now you are worthy of that immense love which I devote and dedicate to you—and to you alone!"

"And may my right hand wither, Pauline, when I deceive you!" cried the impassioned Gabriel, as he covered her blushing countenance with kisses.

"We understand each other better now than ever," whispered the amiable girl; "and if the sincerest affection which woman's heart can pour forth be capable of ensuring man's felicity, then that affection is yours and that happiness is within your reach."

"Oh! what sacred power—what holy influence does a virtuous woman possess over the heart of the sterner sex!" exclaimed Florimel, with the most unfeigned enthusiasm. "Henceforth I abjure all those pursuits which once gave me pleasure, but on which I now look with ineffable disgust; and for the future my Pauline's bright example shall be my guiding star. Yes—lovely, angelic being—I am thine—wholly and solely thine; and there shall not exist a secret between us."

"Were it not on account of my poor sister, I should be the happiest woman on the face of the earth," said the beautiful girl, as she resumed her place by her lover's side. "But, alas!" she added, in a different tone and with overclouding countenance,—"you ere now gave utterance to words which have almost confirmed my previous suspicion that Octavia is ruined — lost — betrayed irremediably! Tell me, Gabriel—tell me—do you know aught of this Mr. Harley?"

"Listen to me, my angel—and prepare to hear evil intelligence," said the young nobleman, taking one of her fair hands and pressing it between both his own. "I know this much—that Mr. Harley is a man of rank, and that so far from entertaining honourable intentions towards your sister, he is engaged to be married to another."

"He is a man of rank," murmured Pauline, in a faint tone: "and that rank——"

"Has never been revealed to me," was the prompt reply.

"I shall no longer give way to grief," said the young lady, her countenance suddenly assuming a determined expression, although still retaining all the feminine sweetness that was natural to it. "You and I, Gabriel, must now work in Octavia's interest, but unknown to her:"—then, after a moment's reflection, she rose—fetched a newspaper from an adjoining room—and, returning to her seat, observed, as she pointed to a paragraph in one of the columns of the print, "This journal of yesterday announces that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales will give a grand entertainment to-morrow evening."

"To which I have received an invitation, through the interest of her Grace the Duchess of Devonshire, who is my cousin," said Florimel. "I have never yet had the honour of being presented to the heir-apparent; and it was therefore my intention to avail myself of the opportunity of visiting Carlton House to-morrow evening."

"And I shall accompany you, Gabriel," returned Pauline, in a decided tone.

"Would that I had the power to make you my companion!" exclaimed the young nobleman. "I should indeed be proud of you, my angel: and when you are Lady Florimel, the doors of Carlton House will be open to you. But the etiquette of those princely saloons is so rigid—so strict—so exclusive——"

"I will obtain an invitation," said Pauline. "Do you not think that Lord Marchmont can accomplish this much for me? If so, my cousin, the Hon. Arthur Eaton will prevail upon his father to interest himself in my behalf."

"I fear that you will be disappointed in that quarter, dearest," answered Florimel. "Lord Marchmont is a Tory—and the Tories, you must know, have not the slightest influence at Carlton House. But—a thought strikes me! Come with me to Devonshire House—I have the *entrée* even at this early hour—and I will introduce you to the Duchess as my intended bride. Her Grace will perhaps undertake to *chaperon* you to-morrow evening."

"A thousand thanks, dear Gabriel! In five minutes I shall be ready to accompany you."

And thus speaking, the beautiful girl tripped lightly from the room.

CHAPTER LXX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

The church-clocks were striking twelve as Lord Florimel handed Miss Pauline Clarendon into his carriage which was waiting at the door; and he ordered the coachman to drive to Devonshire House, Piccadilly.

Away started the splendid equipage; and the young nobleman felt proud and happy in having so charming and amiable a companion. On her side, Pauline was so profoundly touched by the frank and candid behaviour of her lover during the conversation which had so recently passed between them, that her happiness would have been complete, had not the position of her sister become so serious a cause of affliction.

In due time the carriage stopped in front of Devonshire House; and the hall-porter, who answered the summons given by one of Lord Florimel's footmen, said that her Grace was at home.

The young nobleman assisted Pauline to alight; and they were conducted up a magnificent staircase, into a small but elegantly furnished room, where the Duchess of Devonshire, attired in a graceful *dishabillé*, was half reclining on a sofa placed so that she might catch the warmth of the cheerful fire which blazed on the hearth.

Florimel was a great favourite with the Duchess; and she received him with all the cordial familiarity of a relative. In a becoming manner and suitable terms he presented Miss Pauline Clarendon, with the delicate intimation that she was shortly to become Lady Florimel; and the Duchess, taking the young maiden's hand, addressed her with so much affability and graceful courtesy that she was instantly relieved of any embarrassment she had at first experienced on finding herself in the presence of that brilliant leader of the fashionable world.

"It is very amiable of your Grace to receive us at this unseasonable hour," said Florimel: "and an apology is necessary on my part——"

"Not at all, Gabriel," interrupted the Duchess. "You are always welcome—and doubly so this morning, inasmuch as you have brought so interesting a companion. But in the same friendly and unceremonious manner that I now receive you both, must I inform you that I have only a quarter of an hour to devote to you on this occasion: for at one o'clock her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough will be here."

"We will not intrude many minutes upon you, my charming and amiable cousin," said Florimel. "In fact, I have a little favour to ask you——"

"If you mean that I must be present on a certain day," exclaimed the Duchess, with a smile of enchanting archness, "and that I must keep myself disengaged for a particular ceremony, rest assured that I shall experience great pleasure in accepting the invitation. I hope you intend to make my volatile cousin quite steady, Miss Clarendon?"

"I assuredly hope that the hint contained in the words of your Grace will not be thrown away upon his lordship," answered Pauline, smiling: "and I may add that I have the fullest and most implicit confidence in him."

"You will make a very interesting pair—and I long to see you both standing at the altar," said the Duchess. "Indeed, you and I, Miss Clarendon, must become very good friends. In the course of the ensuing week I shall be receiving company; and I shall expect the pleasure of numbering yourself and sister amongst my guests."

"Then your Grace is aware that Miss Pauline has an elder sister?" observed Florimel.

"Mr. Eaton called upon me yesterday," responded the Duchess; "and he was enthusiastic in describing and praising his two charming cousins. You therefore perceive, Miss Clarendon, that I was prepossessed in your favour before I experienced the pleasure of knowing you."

"The kindness with which your Grace has received me, will never be forgotten," observed Pauline. "But I am fearful that our visit has already been prolonged——"

And she glanced significantly towards Lord Florimel.

"I will at once explain the favour which I have to solicit at your hands, dear cousin," said the young nobleman, addressing the Duchess. "It was not precisely to ask your Grace to honour our bridal-day with your presence: although we should not have omitted that invitation—and now we consider your Grace pledged to accept it. But my Pauline is very anxious to attend the Prince's ball to-morrow evening——"

"And nothing would have afforded me greater pleasure than to introduce her," interrupted the Duchess: "but it is unfortunately impossible—inasmuch as the ball is preceded by a dinner-party, to which I am honoured with an invitation. On the next occasion, however, Miss Clarendon may hold me engaged to act the agreeable part of *chaperon*."

Pauline was about to express her thanks for this promise so affably and readily given, when the door was thrown open—and a footman announced her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough.

But what pen can describe the amazement—what language can convey an idea of the astonishment of Pauline Clarendon, when in these ladies she recognised the *Mrs. Mordaunt* and the *Mrs. Smith* whom she had encountered on an occasion well remembered by the reader.

The Princess Sophia did not immediately notice the young lady—because she was at once accosted by the Duchess of Devonshire, who hastened to conduct her to a seat: but Eleanor instantaneously beheld and recognised Pauline—and, though for one moment completely astounded, yet in the next she recovered her presence of mind, and, with admirable tact, approached her, saying, "My dear Miss Clarendon, I am rejoiced to meet you again. I hope that my friend Octavia is as well as your own appearance proves *you* to be?"

Pauline murmured a few scarcely intelligible words in reply: for the sense of amazement had taken so strong a hold upon her that she could not immediately shake it off. But she felt the Countess press with an unmistakable significancy the hand which her ladyship had taken in her own: and raising her eyes, Pauline threw upon her a look which, though rapid, conveyed the assurance that "*the secret was safe with her.*"

"I am delighted that we have thus met, Miss Clarendon," continued Eleanor, repeating the young lady's name louder than before, so that it might reach the Princess and make her Royal Highness aware who was present.

And as that name struck the ears of the frail daughter of George the Third, she gave so sudden a start and turned so ashy pale, that the Duchess of Devonshire exclaimed, "Good heavens! your Royal Highness is unwell!"

At these words, Lord Florimel sprang towards the bell-pull to summon assistance: but the Princess, instantaneously recovering her presence of mind by one of those almost superhuman efforts of which we mortals are sometimes capable in pressing emergencies, stopped the young nobleman with her own hand—saying, "It is nothing—a sudden indisposition seized upon me: but it has passed."

"Are you sure that you feel better, my dearest friend?" inquired the Countess of Desborough, hastily accosting the Princess Sophia. "Oh! I am well aware that your Royal Highness is subject to these sudden and evanescent attacks ——"

"Thank you for your kind solicitude, my dear Eleanor," said the Princess: "I can assure you that the faintness—the giddiness—which seized upon me, has totally passed."

And, as she uttered these words, she darted a significant look upon the Countess, to imply that her presence of mind was completely restored.

Eleanor now returned to Pauline, who was standing at a little distance;—and, taking the young lady's hand, she said in a low and rapid whisper, "You must be presented as if you had never seen the Princess before:"—then, leading her towards Sophia, she exclaimed, "Permit me to introduce to your Royal Highness a much esteemed and amiable friend of mine—Miss Pauline Clarendon."

"Every friend of yours, Eleanor, is welcome to me," said the Princess Sophia, receiving Pauline with a more than ordinary condescension and graceful affability; although the colour came and went in rapid transitions upon the cheeks of the very handsome but frail and dishonoured daughter of George the Third.

Lord Florimel was likewise presented to the Princess, and then to the Countess, with whom he was previously unacquainted — the Duchess of Devonshire performing this ceremony for her noble cousin; and the conversation turned upon the grand entertainment which the Prince of Wales was to give on the following evening.

"I am glad this subject has been mentioned," observed the Duchess of Devonshire, who, in spite of her levity, was excessively good-natured, and who had taken a great fancy to Pauline: "because," she continued, "Miss Clarendon is anxious to be present at his Royal Highness's ball—and I am unable to introduce her, inasmuch as I am honoured by an invitation to dine with his Royal Highness and Mrs. Fitzherbert. But you, my dear Eleanor," she added, turning towards the Countess of Desborough, "will perhaps take charge of our young friend, who, I may observe, is shortly to become Lady Florimel."

"I should be delighted to present Miss Clarendon to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales," said the Countess: "but circumstances, I fear, will prevent me from accepting the invitation with which I have been honoured."

"Indeed, my dear Eleanor," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, "you must over-rule any circumstances which threaten to keep you away from my royal brother's entertainment to-morrow evening. I shall be there—and it will prove a great disappointment to me if I do not meet you on this occasion at Carlton House. I shall even consider it unkind towards myself if you remain absent."

"And I, too," said the Duchess of Devonshire, "shall be grieved if I do not meet you to-morrow evening, Eleanor. You must positively renounce any other engagement which you may have formed."

It was with no small degree of difficulty that the Countess of Desborough concealed her vexation at being thus pressed: for, as the reader may easily conceive, she had her own private motives for not wishing to attend the heir-apparent's ball, nor indeed even to come in contact with his Royal Highness again. The conversation which she had overheard between him and the Magsman had filled her with loathing, indignation, and aversion for that princely voluptuary: and any tenderness of feeling which she might at one moment have experienced towards him, had been changed by a deeper reading of his character into abhorrence and disgust.

But the Princess Sophia—not suspecting that her friend had any private motive of dislike with regard to the Prince of Wales, and anxious by any means to conciliate and please the young lady who was the depositress of her own tremendous secret—continued to urge the point relative to the invitation to Carlton House, with a zeal and earnestness which amounted almost to a command and rendered a refusal impossible.

"Yes, my dear Eleanor, you must go—and Miss Clarendon will then be enabled to accompany you," said the Princess. "Were it not inconsistent with the prevailing etiquette, I would myself introduce Miss Clarendon."

And as she uttered these words, the Princess Sophia threw a look full of deep meaning upon Pauline—as much as to say, "Keep my secret faithfully—and I will prove your friend in all things."

The result of so much pressing on the part of her Royal Highness and the Duchess of Devonshire, was that Eleanor was compelled to yield;—and, in thus yielding, she was also under the necessity of offering to act as *chaperon* for Miss Pauline Clarendon on the occasion. It was consequently arranged that Pauline should repair to Desborough House in Berkeley Square at nine o'clock on the following evening, and thence accompany the Countess to the palatial residence of the Prince of Wales.

This matter being settled, to the great delight of the young lady, she and Florimel took their leave.

When they were once more alone together in the carriage, and as they were whirling back to Cavendish Square, Florimel said, "And now, my beloved Pauline, you have gained your point most effectually; and to-morrow evening I shall have the pleasure of dancing with you at Carlton House. But what excuse will you make to your father and sister for having accompanied me in my carriage this morning?—and upon what pretext will you be enabled to leave the house in ball-room costume to-morrow evening?"

"My dear Gabriel," replied Pauline, "when we reach Cavendish Square presently, you must demand a private interview with my father, and inform him that you have honoured me by a proposal, and

that you have been referred to him. Will you do this?"

"I am rejoiced that I have received your permission to take this step," answered the young nobleman, pressing her hand tenderly. "Mr. Clarendon will not then think it strange that you should have consented to take a drive—round the park shall we say?—in my carriage."

"When he sees that your intentions are honourable, my Gabriel," responded Pauline, "he will not allude to the circumstance. With regard to the affair of to-morrow evening, my father fortunately dines out—and I shall not be at a loss to invent some excuse to satisfy Octavia. Indeed, I will tell her that I am to accompany you to the Opera—and you must call for me in your carriage at twenty minutes to nine. You can then put me down at Desborough House in Berkeley Square."

"All this shall be attended to, my beloved," said Florimel.

"And now, Gabriel," resumed the young maiden, gazing tenderly upon him,—"you must not imagine that because I am so ready in devising the means to lull my sister's suspicions asleep to-morrow evening, and mislead her as to the real place and object of my visit,—you must not imagine, I say, that duplicity is no stranger to me——"

"I would not wrong you thus grossly!" exclaimed Florimel, in an impassioned tone. "I know you to be innocence itself—I am aware of the motives which prompt you to visit Carlton House to-morrow evening—and your sisterly feelings render you all the more estimable in my eyes. Your conduct, my Pauline, on the first occasion of our acquaintance, has taught me to admire—love—and respect you," he added, again pressing the hand which he retained in his own.

"And your conduct of this day, Gabriel, has endeared you to me more than I can explain," murmured the beauteous creature, fixing upon him a look full of unutterable feelings.

"It is sweet to be praised by your lips!" exclaimed Florimel, returning that look with one of adoration. "But I must congratulate you, Pauline, on the readiness with which your appearance and manners engage the esteem and friendship of those with whom you come in contact. The Duchess of Devonshire took an immediate fancy to you: the Countess of Desborough greeted you as kindly as if you were her sister;—and the Princess Sophia pleaded most eloquently in your behalf respecting the presentation at the heir-apparent's ball to-morrow night."

Pauline had no time to respond to these observations: for at the moment her lover had done speaking, the carriage stopped in Cavendish Square.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE FAIR PATRICIAN AND THE RESUSCITATED.

It was about four o'clock on that Sunday afternoon when the Countess of Desborough returned to her residence in Berkeley Square.

The incidents of the morning had annoyed her; and there was a certain pouting expression upon her coral lips, which, instead of impairing the effect of her loveliness, gave an indescribable charm to her classically chiselled features.

Retiring at once to her own chamber, and dismissing her female attendants the instant they had assisted her to lay aside her bonnet and scarf, she threw herself into an arm-chair and gave way to her reflections.

"To-morrow evening I shall be doomed to meet that despicable voluptuary face to face!"—thus ran the current of her thoughts. "Oh! how my blood boils at the idea of having permitted him to bestow his lustful kisses on my cheeks—my lips! How maddened with rage do I feel at the recollection of that weakness which induced me to assent to admit him to my chamber! But thank God! I escaped his polluted embrace;—and the amour which his infamous pander and assistant, the milliner of Pall Mall, was sent hither to forward and promote, was interrupted at the very moment when *he* stood upon the threshold of success, and *I* on that of shame and degradation. And now—to think that I must appear to-morrow evening in the presence of this man—treat him with the respect due to his princely rank—and receive any courtesy which he may choose to demonstrate towards me! But even *this* I could endure—and I should not be so deeply vexed and troubled now on that account alone. Alas! I foresee that my beloved friend, the Princess Sophia, stands upon an abyss. Her honour is in the keeping of two young ladies——And yet neither Octavia nor Pauline would betray her! No—no: they are good and amiable girls—they will keep her secret. Her secret, indeed! Does not her royal brother know it?—and is he not aware that the child was born at the very house occupied at the time by these young ladies? And one of them is to be presented to him to-morrow night! Poor Sophia! were she aware that her secret was thus known to her eldest brother—the brother of whom she stands most in awe—she would die with grief. Alas! alas! how is all this to end? My soul is filled with gloomy presentiments. Wherefore should Pauline Clarendon be thus anxious to appear at Carlton House? Is it through that curiosity which influences giddy girls?—is it to gratify a mere sentiment of vanity?—or has she a still less worthy motive in view? No—no: she is a good girl, I repeat; and it is natural enough that she should desire to mingle in that bright sphere of fashion to the confines of which she has only been so very lately raised."

Such were the conflicting thoughts and anxieties which swept through the imagination of the Countess of Desborough in the solitude of her own chamber. But her reflections gradually flowed into another channel;—and a voluptuous langour came gradually upon her,—like the softly stealing influence of a dreamy repose in an atmosphere oppressive with mingled sultriness and perfume,—as she murmured the name of *Gustavus Wakefield!*

Then, rising from her seat, she contemplated herself in the full-length mirror which stood near; and as she surveyed her own magnificent form, which was so faithfully reflected on that polished surface, a smile of mingled triumph and joy appeared upon her lips—and then, in another moment, her bosom heaved to the profound sigh that came as it were from the very depths of her soul.

But the influence of her warm and impassioned nature was now upon her;—and, yielding to the

irresistible sway of feelings which she could not control, she proceeded to the drawing-room with the secret hope of finding Ramsey there—*alone!*

Nor was she disappointed: for, the instant she made her appearance, the resuscitated rose from the sofa on which he had been reclining.

This was the sixth day of his sojourn at Desborough House, over the threshold of which he had not once stirred during that interval. Nor had he encountered any of the visitors who happened to call: for, pleading a continued indisposition and likewise a disinclination to mingle in society, he had been permitted to enjoy as complete a seclusion as if he were the master of the mansion and able to act as he chose. His breakfast was served in his own chamber: at mid-day he was wont to repair to the drawing-room, in which the Earl sometimes and the Countess very frequently bore him company;—and with them he had dined every evening since his arrival at the house. With Lord Desborough he was already a great favourite, and in Eleanor's eyes he was the handsomest and most agreeable individual of her acquaintance.

That he was by no means displeasing to the Countess, Ramsey had not failed to observe;—and his profound knowledge of human nature soon convinced him that she was a woman of strong passions. He had likewise perceived that Eleanor and her husband did not occupy the same sleeping-apartment—that, in fact, there was a certain mysterious estrangement between them, resulting from no apparent fault on either side. Vainly did he rack his imagination to conjecture the cause; the circumstance set all his ingenuity at naught;—and the only hypothesis which seemed feasible, was that Eleanor had been unfaithful to her husband—that he had so far forgiven her as to conceal her frailty from the world—but that he could no longer make her the partner of his bed.

And yet when inclining to this belief, Ramsey

was staggered by the fact that Eleanor's deportment towards her husband was not that of a woman conscious of her secret shame: nor was the Earl's behaviour towards her that of a man who had any reason to complain of his wife. On the contrary, he was most tender, affectionate, and devoted with regard to his beautiful Countess; whereas her conduct was somewhat capricious and versatile—at one time reciprocating his love, and at another being characterised by a coldness which she evidently tried to subdue, but could not.

When he reflected upon these circumstances, he could not in any way reconcile them with the supposition he had formed to account for the fact of the Earl and Countess sleeping in separate apartments; and yet in no other manner was he able to find a reason for this singular mode of life which they led. It was strange—most strange, that a man in the prime of his years and a lovely woman of ardent temperament and glowing passions should practise a self-denial as mysterious as it was unnatural.

But we have observed that Ramsey had perceived that he himself was not displeasing to the Countess; and, unmindful of the generous hospitality which he had received and was still receiving at the hands of the Earl of Desborough,—forgetful of his duty towards the nobleman who had promised to become his friend and patron, and who, with the most admirable philanthropy, had undertaken to provide for him in future,—the treacherous guest had already resolved upon the seduction of Eleanor!

With these few observations, we resume the thread of our narrative.

The heart of the Countess of Desborough was beating rapidly, and a rich carnation glow appeared beneath the transparent olive of her cheeks, as she entered the drawing-room where, as she had hoped and anticipated, she found Ramsey alone.

And he failed not to observe that heightening colour and the trepidation of her manner as she advanced across the spacious apartment—her rich dress sweeping the thick carpet on which her elastic steps scarcely left a visible impression.

"Your ladyship took advantage of a day unusually fine at this season of the year," observed Ramsey, as he made a low and graceful bow on accosting the Countess.

"My beloved friend the Princess Sophia sent yesterday to command me to wait upon her at a somewhat early hour in the forenoon to-day," responded Eleanor; "and we paid a visit to the Duchess of Devonshire. But how happens it, Mr. Wakefield, that you have not also availed yourself of this glorious sunshine to breathe the fresh air? A little exercise would have benefitted you, after your severe indisposition."

"I feel no inclination to cross the threshold of your ladyship's hospitable mansion," said Ramsey; "until I leave it altogether," he added, with a half-stifled sigh.

"But you are in no hurry to leave us, Mr. Wakefield!" exclaimed the Countess, with involuntary warmth; and instantaneously perceiving that she had spoken in such a tone, she became scarlet with confusion and embarrassment. "I mean," she accordingly hastened to add, "that, until you are perfectly recovered, it is quite unnecessary for you to seek another abode."

"Did I consult my own feelings alone, I should not indeed be precipitate in leaving this friendly home which I so providentially found," observed Ramsey, throwing a certain degree of mournful tenderness into his voice: "but, under circumstances, the sooner I depart——"

And, stopping short, he affected to be seized with a confusion as complete as that which Eleanor had ere now experienced in such reality.

"Has anything occurred to displease you, Mr. Wakefield?" she inquired. "It is the wish of the Earl and of myself that you should receive all possible attention; and if you have sustained any annoyance—any slight—any neglect——"

"My God! I have been treated too well—too kindly," interrupted Ramsay, with enthusiasm; "and my heart abounds in feelings of the most fervent gratitude towards your noble husband and yourself."

"Then wherefore hint so mysteriously that circumstances will compel you to depart soon, Mr. Wakefield?" asked the Countess, in a voice that trembled somewhat, and with a strange fluttering of the heart.

"Did I indeed make such an observation? Then I was wrong—very wrong," exclaimed Ramsey, speaking as if vexed with himself. "But in order that your ladyship may not interpret my inconsiderate words to the prejudice of the domestics of this establishment, permit me to assure you that I have received every possible attention at their hands. The circumstances to which I allude——"

"Are perhaps connected with your position in this country?" said Eleanor. "I am acquainted with your history—the Earl has made it known to me in all its details—and I can understand, Mr. Wakefield, how painful it must be for one nurtured in ease and comfort, and looking upon himself as the heir to a large fortune, to awake from that dream, and find adversity instead of prosperity staring him in the face. Such has indeed been your lot: but you must not look upon the future with apprehension and distrust. The Earl of Desborough has proffered you his friendship; and he is a man of warm heart and generous feelings. But not until you are completely restored to health, will he begin to talk to you seriously upon the course of life which may best suit your inclinations, and on which he will assist you to enter. In the interval it is his desire that you should make this house your home; and it would grieve him were he to hear you speak of any circumstances prompting you to depart abruptly."

"Again do I assure your ladyship," said Ramsey, in a soft and low voice, "that if I consulted my own inclinations only, I should not dream of quitting this hospitable mansion. But—pardon me—forgive me," he exclaimed, his tone suddenly becoming impassioned and his manner excited, "if my happiness is compromised—even if it be not already wrecked beyond redemption—Oh! would to God that I had never set foot in this metropolis—that I had never left my native Jamaica to seek my fortune on the British soil!"

And, wringing his hands, he appeared to be profoundly affected.

"Mr. Wakefield, I am grieved to observe that you are unhappy," said Eleanor, her heart palpitating more rapidly than ever, and a singular sensation coming over her as if some magnetic influence associated herself and her own feelings with the passionate emotions which Ramsey displayed. "I speak to you more frankly than I should to another friend or acquaintance, because you are a guest in this house—because you are a stranger in this country—

and because your misfortunes have neither been few nor light. And, therefore, do I repeat that I am grieved to behold these proofs of unhappiness on your part—and I fear that some secret sorrow is oppressing you. If this conjecture be correct—and if it should lie in the Earl of Desbosongh's power to remove the cause——"

"Every word that your ladyship utters is aggravating my misery," exclaimed Ramsey, casting upon her a look full of tenderness: then, instantly withdrawing his eyes, he said, "I implore you to suffer me to leave this house before my feelings hurry me into expressions which you would receive with indignation, and which would leave me no alternative than suicide in the despair that I should experience for having given utterance to them."

And, as he thus spoke, he sprang from his seat and rushed towards the door.

"Mr. Wakefield—stop—I conjure you!" cried Eleanor, also starting from her chair. "This conduct on your part will appear so strange—so unaccountable——Besides," she added hastily, "it is scarcely kind of you to fly from us as if we were your enemies instead of your friends!"

"You command me to remain—and I obey you; beauteous lady!" said Ramsey, turning back and advancing slowly towards the spot where the Countess, trembling all over with indescribable emotions, was supporting herself by holding to the mantelpiece. "Yes—I obey you in this, as I am ready to obey you in all things—even with the sacrifice of my life! But, remember," he added, suddenly sinking his voice to a low whisper,—"remember that, when in your presence, I am not master of myself!"

"What do you mean?—I am bewildered—confused," murmured Eleanor, sinking back into her chair—while her glowing cheeks, her heaving bosom, and her melting eyes bore evidence to the soft and voluptuous feelings which filled her heart.

"You ask me what I mean," said Ramsey, placing himself near her, and fixing upon her a burning, impassioned look which she returned for a moment—a single moment; and then her eyes were cast downward, while deeper grew the blush upon her splendid countenance, and more agitated were the heavings of her breast:—"you ask me what I mean," he repeated, after an instant's pause; "I will tell you! A strange series of adventures rendered me an inmate of your mansion. The generous hospitality which I have received beneath this roof has naturally led me to regard your noble husband as the best of men—yourself as the most estimable of women. Thus far, then, am I devoted to you: I could fall down and worship you both as the kindest friends that God ever gave to man. But, alas! towards yourself, beauteous lady, this sentiment of profound gratitude has deepened into a feeling which I never knew before—a feeling which strangely combines the most exquisite bliss with the acutest anguish—the dreams of heaven with the pains of hell! For I behold you beautiful—Oh! so beautiful, that you appear to me a vision of the fancy's creation, and not a being of earth: and I listen to your voice, which flows like delicious music upon my ears—and I gaze on your countenance—then you observe me not, until I feel as if I could throw myself on my knees before you and entreat that I may become your slave—your humblest menial, in order that I may demonstrate my devotion. Yes—dear lady, all this I experience towards you;—and yet I know that it is a crime to harbour such sentiments. But, my God! as well might a man endeavour to roll back the torrents of Niagara, or breast the rapids of the Canadian rivers, as to hope to stem the tide of such feelings as these which agitate my heart. Therefore, again do I beseech you to suffer me to depart at once—to fly from this mansion whose hospitality I have outraged with my unhappy passion—to leave a city where so bright a vision has burst upon my view to dazzle me for a moment with its supernal lustre and then leave me wretched! Yes—I will depart—O God! I will fly——"

And again he rushed towards the door.

"Gustavus—Mr. Wakefield—this must not be!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Stay—remain—I conjure you!"

And, sinking back into the chair whence she had started for a moment, the Countess covered her face with her hands, as if to close her eyes upon everything around her and look only into the depths of her own soul.

"Is it possible that you have commanded me to remain, after hearing this confession which I have dared to make?" said Ramsey, throwing as much tenderness as possible into his voice, as he once more placed himself near the Countess. "You are not angry with me, then?—Oh! you are not angry with me—you will pardon my presumption—you will forgive my boldness—and perhaps you will pity me, dear lady?" he added, bending his head down close to her own.

"Oh! I am at a loss how to answer you," murmured Eleanor, withdrawing her hands from her countenance and slowly raising her eyes until they met his own—when glowing, ardent, and impassioned were the looks thus exchanged. "You have surprised me—filled me with confusion," she added, in a melting tone: "but you must not think of leaving me—you must not quit the house. Friendless as you are—inexperienced in the ways of this great metropolis——"

"But it is for *your* sake, my benefactress, that I am anxious to depart hence," interrupted Ramsey, in an impassioned tone: "I cannot endure the idea of insulting you by the spectacle of that misery into which my hopeless passion will plunge me. In six days—six short days—I have learnt to love you with an enthusiasm—an adoration—a worship amounting almost to a delirium of the feelings;—and it were madness on my part to remain within the sphere of this influence which maddens while it delights me—which bathes me in ecstatic bliss, and at the same time rends my soul with the crucifixion of ineffable tortures. Wherefore, then, should I remain——"

"Because I ask you to stay—because I implore you not to leave me thus," interrupted the Countess, now so completely borne away by the torrent of her own devouring passions, that she was ready to plunge headlong into the abyss of guilty pleasure and consummate any sacrifice for the sake of that handsome young man who appeared a perfect Adonis in her eyes, as he avowed the ardour of his love with so much apparent ingenuousness. "No—you must remain, Gustavus—dear Gustavus," she added, raising her eyes towards him with a look in which all the voluptuousness of her nature and all the sensuality of her temperament spoke with an unmistakable eloquence: "you must remain, I say—to love me—and to be loved in return."

Her head drooped as her sinking voice murmured

these last words; but in another moment she was caught in Ramsey's arms—she was strained to his breast—their cheeks met in burning contact—and the yielding lady gave back the warm and luscious kisses which her lips received from his own.

"Then you love me, Eleanor—you love me?" whispered Ramsey, after a long pause.

"From the first moment that I saw you, I experienced a profound interest in you," was the soft response; "and that feeling has rapidly gained upon me, acquiring strength the more I saw of you—the oftener I found myself in your society."

"Oh! ten thousand thanks for this assurance, my adored Eleanor!" exclaimed Ramsey, smoothing her hair of velvet blackness and softness above her high and noble forehead. "It is sweet to be beloved by you; and if any one had whispered to me an hour ago that I was so soon to enjoy this elysian happiness, I should have fancied that none but an angel from heaven could have conferred it on me. Dearest, dearest Eleanor—for the first time in my life do I experience the ineffable bliss of love—its mysterious depth—its unfathomable influence—its ecstatic sway—its voluptuous refinement;—and I thank thee—from the profundities of my soul do I thank thee, for initiating me in this empyrean felicity. My existence has kindled into a new life: I feel the consummation of all the golden dreams and brilliant hopes which my fancy has ever formed when wondering what love could be."

"And I also love for the first time," whispered Eleanor, her bosom throbbing with an indescribable rapture.

"For the first time!" exclaimed Ramsey. "Is it possible that you have never loved till now?"

"Never with the ardour—the devotion—the enthusiasm that I feel for you," she replied, her clear soft voice harmonising with that enchanting lovefulness which invested her as with a halo.

"Then you love not your husband, sweet Eleanor?" said Ramsey, straining her to his breast, as she lay half-reclining in his arms—her cheek resting against his own, and their hair mingling.

"No—I never loved him," she answered emphatically: "and I may perhaps some day tell you why all his attention, devotion, and generosity could never succeed in gaining my affections. Yes—that secret may I perhaps reveal to you, Gustavus," she added, a burning blush suffusing itself over her countenance, as she at the same time cast down her eyes in shame and confusion. "But there was a moment—not very long ago—when I fancied that I loved *another;* and for a few days I mistook that transitory feeling for the real, pure, and true passion. Such however it was not: for the instant that this *other's* conduct manifested itself to me in its intense selfishness and utter profligacy, I was enabled to discard him from my heart with an ease that astonished even myself. But towards *you*, Gustavus, I experience a far different sentiment; and I know that this sentiment is love—the sincerest, tenderest love! For were you to appear before my eyes as a character less amiable and worthy than now I believe you to be, I should still love—still cling to you—still be ready and willing to follow you over the face of the earth. This, then, my Gustavus, is love—and it is a love which I have never known before and shall never know again!"

"Oh! welcome, dearest Eleanor—welcome indeed to my soul is this love of thine," said Ramsey, imprinting a thousand kisses upon her lips. "Yes—welcome this virgin love as if it were also your maiden charms which you surrender up to me——"

"Gustavus—dear Gustavus," whispered Eleanor, throwing her arms about his neck and embracing him with the most impassioned ardour: "the words which you have just uttered——But, no matter——I dare not tell you my secret now——"

And her lovely head rested upon his shoulder, her bosom palpitating against his breast.

"To-night, my angel," murmured Ramsey, in a low and melting tone—for his voice was full of a rich masculine melody,—"to-night you will render me completely happy—you will grant me the privileges of love,—you will receive me in your chamber—not with the coyness of the timid girl, but with all the impassioned ardour which has already made your caresses so ineffably sweet."

The Countess whispered a reply; and Ramsey's features became radiant with joy, and triumph, and sensual passion.

"Oh! what happiness awaits me," he continued, in that same soft murmuring tone: "and how tediously will pass the hours until the blissful moment when I shall clasp thee in my arms, confident of already standing on the threshold of paradise! No—not tediously will pass these hours—because we shall be together during the interval; and, though in the presence of your husband, we must control our feelings—restrain the ardour of our looks—and speak only in the usual terms of a cold courtesy,—nevertheless we shall enjoy each other's society, and in the secret depths of our hearts will exist the knowledge that we love and that we shall soon be happy! And when the witching hour arrives at last, my Eleanor—then in the retirement of your own chamber, and when clasped in each other's arms, you can breathe in my ear that secret to which you alluded ere now."

"Yes—for henceforth we will have no secrets with each other," replied the fond, impassioned woman in whose veins the hot blood circulated like lightning.

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'Twas midnight—and Eleanor was now alone in her chamber.

The lady's-maids had just withdrawn, having assisted their mistress to lay aside her garments, and arrange her luxuriant hair for the night.

A loose wrapper enveloped her form—her naked feet were thrust into slippers;—and, half-reclining upon a sofa drawn near the fire, the Countess awaited with indescribable feelings the coming of her lover.

The wax-candles upon the mantel had been extinguished; and a small night-lamp, placed on the toilette-table joined its rays with the light of the fire to shed a soft and subdued lustre through the room. Delicious perfumes exhaled from porcelain vases standing in the window-recesses;—and the warm and fragrant atmosphere seemed to be the voluptuous breath of love itself.

How rapidly beat Eleanor's heart as she lay half-reclined upon the sofa!

A species of timidity—like that which the virgin-bride feels when entering the nuptial couch—was upon her. Her colour changed fifty times in a minute,—now glowing with the richest crimson upon her cheeks—now sinking into a strange paleness;

and in her eyes there was an expression of intense anxiety mingling with the fires of burning —scorching—devouring passion.

Was it that she knew she was doing wrong, but that she could not wrestle against the fury of her desires?—did she experience, at the bottom of her soul, a regret that she had gone thus far?—would she have retreated and repented even yet, if it were possible to overcome these sensual longings which consumed and devoured her?

We know not—and we have not leisure now to analyse the feelings of the Countess of Desborough; for, hark—a footstep in the passage reaches her ear——Oh! how audibly her heart beats—how tumultuously her bosom heaves!—the door opens—and Ramsey appears!

Scarcely can he restrain his impatience sufficiently to spare a moment to lock the door: another instant—and he is clasped in the arms of the Countess.

"Dearest, dearest, Eleanor!" he exclaims, as he enfolds her in his embrace

"Dearest, dearest Gustavus!" she murmurs, straining him to her bosom.

And if hell's flames were immediately to follow the consummation of her frailty, she would not resign these few moments of elysium to save herself from that eternity of pain.

Forgotten is her husband—forgotten is every sense of duty—forgotten is all the world beyond the four walls of that chamber of love! Oh, if she knew everything concerning her lover!—but she did not!

"Dearest, dearest Eleanor!" what rapture was there in the words for her ears!

"Dearest, dearest Gustavus!"—with what ineffable delight did she murmur the avowal of love to him who was now dearest to her of all the world!

And now Ramsey learnt the nature of that secret which Eleanor had promised to reveal to him, and the knowledge of which instantly accounted for all that had hitherto appeared so extraordinary and mysterious between herself and her husband.

CHAPTER LXXII.

FRESH SCHEMES AND PLOTS.

Leaving the Countess of Desborough and the resuscitated to enjoy the delights of love in each other's arms, we must go back three or four hours and request our readers to accompany us, at about half-past eight o'clock on that Sunday evening, to the dwelling of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall.

It will be remembered that this delectable lady had invited Lord Florimel to sup with her on the Sabbath now so particularly referred to—and she had promised that Camilla Morton should be present. Since the previous Monday evening, when the invitation was given, Mrs. Brace had not heard from the young nobleman; and she therefore concluded that he meant to honour her with his company. Due arrangements were accordingly made for the select banquet;—and Camilla, experiencing not the remotest suspicion of Mrs. Brace's treacherous intentions, had suffered herself to be persuaded to keep her mistress company in entertaining the noble guest. It is true that the young girl would in reality have preferred the privacy of her own chamber: but this feeling on her part was solely on account of the recent loss of her parents, and not through any misgiving with respect to the integrity of the milliner: on the contrary, in the artlessness and innocence of her soul, she had fancied that it was from motives of delicacy that Mrs. Brace had invited her, as she might have chosen any other of her young ladies to be present on an occasion when she was to receive a male guest.

The preparations for the little banquet, then, were in progress: the cook was busy in the kitchen —Mrs. Brace, elegantly dressed, was already seated in her parlour—and Camilla was arranging her toilette in her own chamber,—when, at half-past eight, a letter was delivered at the house, by one of Lord Florimel's footmen.

Mrs. Brace opened it hurriedly, and read the following words:—

"I regret my dear friend, to occasion you any disappointment: but it is totally impossible for me to partake of your hospitality this evening. Nor do I think it likely that I shall ever be enabled to visit you again. For I have this day succeeded in making my peace with the charming and well beloved Pauline: nay, more—I have demanded her in marriage of her father, who at once accepted my proposal.

"Now, look you, my dear friend—understand—and be reasonable. It suits me to throw off my bad habits and to enter on a more steady career. This I am resolved to do—and nothing shall deter me from my purpose. Be so kind, then, as to throw no more temptations in my way—to send no more young ladies to my house with letters—indeed, to forget that I was ever a patron or client of yours. Your friend I will with pleasure remain—that is, to render you a service whenever I may do so with honour to myself; but in any case, our future correspondence must be through the post. Now, do not think that I am angry with you: it is no such thing. I have not turned saint—but am merely reformed in that point of conduct which did indeed most deplorably lack amendment. I do not intend to cut you—nor yet to act ungratefully towards you; because I have received many kindnesses at your hands. But I am going to be steady—and that declaration explains everything.

"Rest assured, my dear friend, that you have no well-wisher more sincere than myself. As a proof of my good feeling I will give you a hint which may not be unserviceable: but I rely on your honour to keep the matter entirely to yourself. It is this:—*The plot in which poor Octavia Clarendon is the heroine, thickens rapidly. My beloved Pauline is not idle on behalf of her sister; and of course I cannot stay her proceedings, even if I felt inclined. In less than forty eight hours she will have cleared up all doubts respecting the identity of Octavia's lover!*

"Again I implore you to retain these hints a profound secret, at least so far as my name is concerned. But be assured that there is a storm brewing—and you will do well to adopt some measure to screen yourself.

"FLORIMEL."

The letter fell from Mrs. Brace's hand—and at the same instant the Prince of Wales was ushered into the room by Harriet.

The lady's-maid retired immediately, closing the door behind her; and his Royal Highness advanced towards Mrs. Brace, who had risen from her seat on his entrance. But the moment he obtained a nearer view of her countenance, he was struck by the expression of trouble and annoyance which it wore; and, seizing both her hands, he exclaimed,

"My dear Fanny, what, in heaven's name! is the matter?"

"Nothing — nothing — a little temporary vexation," she said, endeavouring to smile: but the attempt was very ineffectual.

"It is something more serious than you choose to admit," observed the Prince: then, his eye catching the letter which lay upon the rug, he stooped down and picked it up.

"You must not read it!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, extending her hand to receive the note.

"This is silly of you, Fanny," said the Prince, neither giving her the document nor yet reading it. "I hold in my hand the undoubted cause of your annoyance and vexation—and you are well aware that I should not wish to become acquainted with its contents through any motive of jealousy. Such nonsense has long ceased to exist between you and me. Therefore, when I express an anxiety to read this letter, it is through pure solicitude on your behalf——"

"And an apprehension that it may probably refer to yourself," added the milliner, with a tartness which she very rarely exhibited to any one—much less to the Prince of Wales. "Well—I do not know but that you had better peruse the document," she observed immediately afterwards, in a milder tone.

His Royal Highness accordingly cast his eyes over the letter;—and his countenance fell.

"By heaven! this is serious," he ejaculated, flinging himself upon a seat, while Mrs. Brace resumed her chair opposite to him. "'*The plot thickens rapidly*,'" he said in a musing tone, as he referred to Florimel's communication: "by God! it must thicken as much as it likes," he exclaimed abruptly, "for anything that I can do to prevent it. '*Pauline is not idle on behalf of her sister*.' This is just what I foresaw—just what I expected all along. Pauline and Florimel are two maudlin sentimentalists together; and they will work a deal of mischief. How the deuce is it, Fanny, that you did not contrive to have Pauline debauched by some gay fellow, or else to produce a separation between her and Florimel? The thing is serious: but may I be particularly damned if I know how to remedy it. '*In less than forty-eight hours she*'—that's Pauline—'*will have cleared up all doubt respecting the identity of Octavia's lover*.' Forty-eight hours! When was this note written?"

"It reached me a few instants before you entered the room," answered Mrs. Brace.

"To be sure! I ought to have recollected the confusion and trouble in which you were plunged at the moment," said the Prince. "Well — forty-eight hours——that's plenty of time to adopt some decisive measure in."

"Oh! you must not take the phrase in its literal sense," exclaimed the milliner. "It may mean a longer, or it may mean a shorter period: but it is used emphatically to show that the interval will be brief ere your rank is discovered. So far, therefore, from postponing a due and serious consideration of the proper measures to be adopted, we must deliberate at once."

"If there be one thing more than another that I hate," said the Prince, speaking as if he had a nausea in his mouth, "it is the trouble of thinking on disagreeable matters."

"Possibly!" observed Mrs. Brace, with petulant dryness. "But your Royal Highness will be pleased to reflect that an exposure in this instance may compromise the very crown which you have in the perspective. A young lady of good family, seduced by the Prince of Wales under a feigned name—led to believe that his intentions were honourable, and that he would espouse her,—my God! such a history would create a feeling of indignation from one end of the kingdom to the other; and the people would pull down my house about my ears".

"No, my dear Fanny—we'd have a regiment of Guards stationed along Pall Mall, to protect you," responded the Prince, in a jocular manner. "Thank God, we always have plenty of General officers who like nothing better than having to open a murderous cannonade upon the people!"

"This is not a time nor a subject for jesting," said Mrs. Brace. "I beseech you to look seriously at the matter — for it troubles me profoundly. You perceive that even if you were enabled to silence Octavia by means of the influence you exercise over her, her sister Pauline would still proceed——"

"And this Florimel would no doubt help her," added the Prince. "By the bye, he is coming to Carlton House to-morrow night. He voted with the small Whig section in the House of Lords the other evening—and I was therefore compelled to place his name on my reception-list. I shall be very civil to him to-morrow, and thus disarm him of any rancour with which Pauline may have inspired him: for it is perfectly clear that the identity of Mr. Harley with the Prince of Wales is even more than suspected by that young lady—whereas Octavia is perhaps still full of uncertainty."

"You may conciliate Florimel, perhaps," said Mrs. Brace: "besides, you perceive by his note that he would rather hush the matter up if he could. But depend upon it, from all I have heard, Pauline Clarendon is a girl of spirit and will leave you no peace when once she shall have established the fact of your identity. There is only one plan that I can think of——"

"Name it—name it, my dear Fanny," cried the Prince. "I knew you would end by suggesting something: you are so fertile in expedients. Besides, women always like to make matters out as bad as they can, when they mean to wind up by proposing a remedy. Now then, my dear, what is your plan?"

"Listen patiently for a few minutes," said the milliner, smiling at the compliments which the Prince paid her. "You are well acquainted with Mr. Clarendon's position. A few weeks ago he believed himself certain of succeeding to the Marchmont peerage, the Hon. Arthur Eaton being then at death's door. But this young gentleman has recovered in a most miraculous manner; and there is not the slightest chance that Mr. Clarendon will ever be Lord Marchmont. To make things still more unpleasant for Mr. Clarendon, he accepted a large income from the present Lord Marchmont; and went and took a fine house, at the time when Arthur Eaton was supposed to be dying. He is therefore totally dependant on Lord Marchmont's bounty; and at the old peer's death, he will be dependant on Arthur. Such a position is doubtless intolerable for Mr. Clarendon; and yet it is quite clear that he cannot well retreat, and go back to his cottage in the Edgeware Road and his hundred or two hundred a year."

"What on earth is all this to come to?" demanded the Prince of Wales.

"Why—that you must obtain a peerage and a pension for Mr. Clarendon, as the price of having the intrigue with his elder daughter completely hushed up," returned Mrs. Brace.

"And Pauline?" said his Royal Highness.

"Must submit to any arrangement her father chooses to make," answered the astute milliner.

"By heavens! you are the shrewdest woman I ever met in all my life," exclaimed the Prince. "But you forget that I have not the slightest influence with the Ministry to obtain a peerage and a pension for any one who is even well known—much less for a comparatively obscure individual——"

"No influence with the ministry perhaps," interrupted Mrs. Brace; "but have you not the power of *extorting by menaces* from your royal father——"

And she fixed her fine eyes significantly upon him.

"To be sure!" Hannah Lightfoot's paper—or rather the half of it!" exclaimed the Prince. "Your advice is admirable. I'll send my friend Tim Meagles to my father to negociate the business. On Tuesday morning the matter shall be entered upon. Thanks to your counsel, Fanny, I now see my way pretty clearly out of this thicket of difficulties. And now you will permit me to inform you what it is that brought me hither this evening."

"I am all attention," said Mrs. Brace. "But will you stay and sup with me? You perceive by Florimel's note——"

"That he has disappointed you," added the Prince, with a smile. "Well—I will take his place at your table this evening. Shall we be alone?"

"If you like. But there was to have been another——"

"A young lady, I'll be bound!" ejaculated his Royal Highness.

"Precisely. She is a sweet creature,—and I intended to tempt Florimel with her," said Mrs. Brace. "Her name is Camilla Morton—and as a camilla is she pure and chaste."

"By all means, let her sup with us," cried the Prince. "In the meantime I will hurriedly inform you what brought me hither this evening. You are aware that to-morrow night there are grand doings at Carlton House. Invitations were of course sent, amongst others, to the Earl and Countess of Desborough; and I heard just now—about an hour before I came hither—that the Countess will accept the invitation."

"I should scarcely believe it," observed Mrs. Brace.

"But I know that she *will* be present to-morrow evening," returned the Prince, emphatically. "My sister the Princess Sophia and the Duchess of Devonshire both told me so just now, in the course of conversation."

"And what do you propose to do?" inquired the milliner: "for, fertile as I may be in expedients, I have not as yet thought of any scheme to forward your views with respect to Lady Desborough."

"I believe that Mrs. Fitzherbert has sent to request your attendance upon her to-morrow evening to superintend her toilette—has she not?" asked the Prince; and, on receiving an affirmative reply, he continued to observe, "Well—that is for the grand dinner-party at seven o'clock; and you will have to remain at Carlton House until nine or half-past in order to see that Mrs. Fitzherbert's toilette is in perfection for the ball. Is it not just as I am describing?"

"Nothing could be more accurate," responded Mrs. Brace, smiling at the minuteness of detail into which his Royal Highness was entering, and the ultimate object of which she could not by any means conjecture.

"So far so good," resumed the Prince. "Now, you are aware that when the company arrive, they ascend the grand staircase, and the ladies pass into a toilette-chamber to lay aside their scarfs or cloaks, before they proceed to the ball-room."

"I cannot be ignorant of this fact," observed Mrs. Brace, "since I have more than once assisted Mrs. Fitzherbert's gentlewomen in that very chamber to receive the ladies' cloaks. This was, however, several years ago, when curiosity prompted me to take that post in order to obtain a good view of your lady-guests and observe the fashions which chiefly prevailed in their toilette."

"Ah! I had forgotten that you had done this," said the Prince. "Well—it is precisely the same thing that I require you to do again to-morrow evening. You will then watch for the Countess of Desborough—and the moment she makes her appearance, you will hasten forward to attend upon her."

"But her ladyship will refuse my services with indignation," cried Mrs. Brace.

"Her ladyship, on the contrary, will affect not to recognise you," returned the Prince. "Do you think that she would draw all eyes upon herself, by any display of feeling on such an occasion? Besides, if questioned by her friends and acquaintances relative to the cause of her anger against you, what reply could she make? Only reflect for a moment upon her position. She has accepted the invitation, partly, no doubt, for fear her husband should imagine that she had any cause of complaint against me—and partly in compliance with the wishes of the Princess Sophia, who is her very dear friend. Her behaviour will therefore be of a character to defy the least suspicion that anything, agreeable or disagreeable, has even taken place between herself and me."

"I comprehend the force of your reasoning," said Mrs. Brace. "I shall therefore hasten to volunteer my assistance to her ladyship the moment she enters the toilette-room——"

"And, while thus aiding her," interrupted the Prince, "you will whisper in her ear these words:—*'It is of the utmost importance that I should speak to your ladyship alone, for a few minutes, presently. Your honour is threatened—your reputation is at stake. I both can and will show your ladyship how to defeat your enemies.'* These ominous words will terrify her, and make her anxious to know more. Her curiosity will be painfully excited, especially as you are the person to utter so singular and mysterious a warning. Taking advantage of this impression which you are certain to create, you must add these words: *'At midnight precisely I shall be at the end of the passage leading from the left of the great landing which your ladyship will cross to enter the ball-rooms. If your ladyship wishes to know more, you can meet me there and then. But come alone—or I shall hurry away if I see you accompanied by any one.'*"

"And if her ladyship should keep the appointment?" said Mrs. Brace, inquiringly.

"Then you will throw open the door of the room

at the end of the passage where she is to meet you—and the Countess will pass on into that apartment, thinking that you are showing her into some retired place where you may converse together without fear of interruption or observation."

"And what next?" asked the milliner.

"Why—the instant the Countess has crossed that threshold," returned the Prince,—"instead of following her, you will shut the door hastily—lock it on the outside—and take your departure. Leave all the rest to me."

"The scheme appears as clumsy in its conception as it will prove awkward in the carrying out," said Mrs. Brace.

"It may seem wild, far-fetched, and even preposterous to describe," observed his Royal Highness: "but, when managed with your tact and ingenuity, it will pass off just as I anticipate. At all events, you will do your best, Fanny?"

"Most decidedly," answered the milliner.

The footman now entered the room to lay the table for supper; and in a few minutes Camilla Morton made her appearance. The Prince of Wales was introduced to her as Mr. Harley; and he was instantaneously struck by her sweet, pensive, and touching style of beauty. The lily whiteness and rose-leaf hue which were so delicately mingled in her complexion, were set off to the greatest advantage by her mourning garb; and the dark vesture likewise enhanced the elegance and grace of that figure which, though slight, was rounded in accordance with the most perfect specimens of Grecian art.

She was somewhat surprised when, instead of meeting Lord Florimel, she was thus introduced to a *Mr. Harley:* but the milliner hastened to inform her that his lordship had been seized with a sudden indisposition, and that Mr. Harley, who was "a very old friend indeed," had dropped in by accident;—and as Camilla cared nothing for either the one or the other, it was perfectly indifferent to her whether she sate down to supper with Lord Florimel or Mr. Harley.

The evening passed away; and, although Camilla fancied that Mr. Harley fixed his eyes upon her somewhat intently more than once, she was nevertheless compelled to admit to herself that he was a polished gentleman, very agreeable, and endowed with great conversational powers. When she rose at eleven o'clock to retire to her own chamber, the Prince proffered his hand and endeavoured to convey her's to his lips, while Mrs. Brace was conveniently stooping to pick up her handkerchief: but Camilla instantly snatched back her hand, while her cheeks suddenly became crimson;—and, darting on his Royal Highness a look which convinced him that he had made no impression upon *her* heart, however agreeable she might have thought him as a companion, the young maiden hurried from the room.

And when she had gained the solitude of her own chamber, Camilla burst into tears: for a suspicion, faint as the murmuring of far-off waters in the ears, had now for the first time sprung up in the secret depths of her soul,—a suspicion with regard to the virtue of Mrs. Brace and the respectability of her establishment.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE GRAND ENTERTAINMENT AT CARLTON HOUSE

It was half-past nine o'clock on the memorable Monday evening so anxiously anticipated by many hearts; and the state saloons of the princely dwelling were bathed as it were in a flood of roseate luxury.

Nothing could transcend—scarcely equal—the brilliancy of the scene.

The lustre of crystal chandeliers and innumerable wax-candles — the gorgeous draperies—the magnificent pictures and mirrors — the splendid furniture, rich in crimson velvet, and glittering with inlaid gold—the costly vases of porcelain and alabaster, filled with hot-house flowers—the immense China jars whence perfumes exhaled—the warm and fragrant atmosphere—and the strains of delicious music which began to pour through the spacious apartment,—all these produced a magical effect, to ravish and enchant the senses.

The guests invited to the ball were now beginning to arrive; and the Prince of Wales, having already left the dinner-table, was conversing with those ladies who had been present at the select banquet.

There was Mrs. Fitzherbert, in all the grandeur of those charms which were now embellished by the richest and most tasteful toilette. Her hair, so pale in hue but so glossy and shining, appeared to have caught the golden rays of a brilliant noonday sun and to have imprisoned them in those luxuriant tresses, which showered over a back and shoulders of pearly whiteness, and even caressed the full and finely rounded bosoms which the low dress left more than half-exposed to the ravished eyes of the beholder.

Next to Mrs. Fitzherbert sate the Duchess of Devonshire, radiant in loveliness, and with glowing smiles upon her coral lips. Nature's own roses, which art cannot equal, blushed softly upon her cheeks; and her silky auburn hair was brilliant with all the richest metallic hues. Love, pleasure, and light were in her large deep hazel eyes: she was a glorious being—a splendid specimen of that finely developed, superb, and Juno-like beauty which in a moment can melt into the tender and yielding sensuousness of wanton Venus.

And in that same saloon where the Prince of Wales was now conversing with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire, there were other heavenly faces and lovely forms: and the lustre of the chandeliers was reflected in eyes bright as the diamonds that surmounted polished foreheads or glistened amidst shining hair. Gracefully, too, waved ostrich-plumes over charming heads; and fair hands agitated the rich fans which raised a gentle zephyr in the midst of the warm, languid, and perfumed atmosphere; — and the rustling satin or the richly flowing velvet swept over the thick carpet, as light footsteps moved across that scene of pleasure.

The company invited to the ball had begun to arrive; and every minute some scion of the aristocracy—some noble, with a star upon his breast, or some lady bearing a proud name — made obeisance to the heir-apparent to the British throne.

Oh! who would have thought that two thirds of the great nobles now assembled, were, if stripped of all the *prestige* of their rank and honours, nothing more nor less than the most infernal robbers, usurpers, and oppressors that ever preyed upon the vitals of the industrious millions?—or who would have fancied that more than half of those beauteous creatures gathered there, and who boasted an alliance with the first families in Britain, were the veriest demireps that ever reflected in the aristocratic sphere the profligacy and demoralization which parade the pavement of the metropolis?

But so it was *then*—so it is *at the present day*—and so it will *ever* be with the British Aristocracy until the knell of its corrupt, iniquitous, and accursed existence be rung by the mighty voice of the popular will.

To return, however, to the thread of our narrative.

We have already stated that the Prince of Wales was conversing with his special favourites in one of the magnificent saloons thrown open at Carlton House upon the occasion of which we are writing: we should now add that in another apartment of the splendid suite, the Princess Sophia was seated upon a sofa, surrounded by several ladies and nobles of the highest rank, and with whom she discoursed in a manner which they subsequently pronounced, in the usual nauseating phraseology of the Court, to be most "gracious" and "condescending."

The Princess was in reality a very handsome woman. Her figure was modelled to the most voluptuous proportions: the plump, sloping shoulders—the long arching neck—and the exuberant bust were of the most dazzling whiteness;—and upon her cheeks the hues of the blushing rose and the stainless lily were delicately blended. Her large blue eyes languished with a wanton look—and her

mouth had that unmistakable expression of sensuality which invariably marked and still marks every scion of the family of Brunswick. Her luxuriant light brown hair flowed in a thousand shining ringlets over her shoulders; and she had a habit of every now and then slightly shaking her head as if it were a pleasure to hear the rustling of those glossy curls or to feel them moving upon her warm and polished flesh. In fine, her whole appearance conveyed the impression of an amorous young creature in whose imagination soft, tender, and wanton thoughts habitually floated, but whose passions were at times susceptible of being excited to a devouring heat and a furious intensity.

Such indeed was the Princess Sophia—one of the frail and licentious daughters of George the Third.

But we must leave her Royal Highness for a brief space, while we hasten to inform our readers that at about a quarter to ten o'clock the Earl of Desborough descended from his carriage at the principal entrance to Carlton House, and assisted his beautiful Countess and the lovely Pauline Clarendon to alight. Then, giving an arm to each lady, he escorted them up the grand staircase.

Oh! how Pauline's heart beat as each step brought her nearer to that circle of light in which she knew that the master of that gorgeous scene was as it were embowered in luxury and enthroned in splendour. That she was about to behold Mr. Harley in the Prince of Wales, she had no longer any doubt: the scene at the Duchess of Devonshire's on the preceding day had removed all previously existing uncertainty upon that point. For Mrs. Mordaunt was the Princess Sophia—and this fact accounted for the sudden disappearance of Mr. Harley when the carriage broke down opposite Paradise Villas, on the first night of his acquaintance with Octavia and Pauline.

When, therefore, the younger Miss Clarendon had reflected upon all the incidents of that night, and recalled to mind the ridiculous tale which Mr. Harley had related (on the occasion of his second visit to the villa) to account for his abrupt departure after gazing in at the window of the travelling-barouche,—when she pondered on all this, Pauline had naturally come to the conclusion that Mr. Harley *was* the Prince of Wales beyond all possibility of doubt.

With a beating heart, then, was it that the lovely creature now ascended the wide and brilliantly-lighted marble staircase; and the inward agitation which she experienced gave a rich crimson glow to her cheeks.

On her side, the Countess of Desborough was not altogether composed and tranquil. She abhorred the idea of meeting the Prince of Wales;—and—more than that—the night of love and pleasure which she had passed in the arms of Philip Ramsey, had rendered her as timid and bashful as a bride on the morning after her wedding. For conscience had its qualms—or rather its terrors with the really well-principled Eleanor, who was a mere novice in the art of duplicity, and who was very far from being an experienced profligate. Thus was it whenever she recalled to mind her frailty of the past night, she felt a burning blush mantling upon her cheeks and suffusing itself over her neck and bosom; while it seemed to her that every eye which glanced upon her countenance could read her secret in that tell-tale glow—and this thought, or rather sensation, made her blush all the more deeply and added to her confusion.

On reaching the summit of the grand staircase the Earl of Desborough left his beauteous wife and the charming Pauline at the door of the ladies' toilette-chamber, while he remained in a waiting-room until they should rejoin him.

The Countess and Pauline accordingly entered that toilette-chamber; and the moment the door closed behind them, the former was accosted by Mrs Brace and the latter by one of the numerous females in attendance there.

The blood mantled on Eleanor's cheeks, suffusing even her lofty brow and descending to her very neck and bosom, when the milliner of Pall Mall, with affable though profoundly respectful mien, advanced to receive the velvet scarf which the patrician lady had thrown over her shoulders to defend herself against the chill night air when descending from the carriage.

The first impulse of the Countess was to pass the woman by in haughty indignation: but, sweeping her looks around, she beheld several ladies of her acquaintance—and, suddenly fearful of provoking a scene with Mrs. Brace, she paused and allowed the milliner to remove the scarf from her shoulders.

"One word, your ladyship—start not—but hear me!" whispered Mrs. Brace: "I declare most solemnly that I wish you well and seek to render you a service, in spite of the displeasure you have visited upon me."

Eleanor turned completely round—fixed her magnificent eyes keenly upon the milliner's countenance—and, perceiving a solemn earnestness in the woman's manner, said in a low voice, "Is it possible that you can have the power or the inclination to render me a service?"

"Yes—a most important service, lady," replied the milliner. "Draw near towards this mirror—there!—now permit me to arrange this straggling curl:" and, seizing the opportunity afforded by her having thus led the Countess aside, Mrs. Brace said in a deep and impressive, but only just audible voice, "The honour of your ladyship is at stake—you stand on the verge of ruin—and I alone can save you!"

Eleanor started—staggered—and supported herself by laying her hand on the shoulder of Mrs. Brace, who whispered, "Compose yourself—in the name of God! compose yourself! No harm is as yet done—the evil only menaces you *now*—it is not present."

"And that evil?" murmured Eleanor, her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom becoming again suffused with a crimson glow: for, in the bewilderment of the moment, and with the milliner's ominous words still ringing in her ears, she naturally associated the warning she had just received with the love, voluptuousness, and frailty of the preceding night—that night which she had passed in the arms of Philip Ramsey! Therefore was it that, with a thousand conflicting ideas springing up in her imagination, the Countess murmured inquiringly, "And that evil?"

"I cannot explain myself now, dear lady," responded Mrs. Brace, in the same rapid and low tone: "but believe me—oh! believe me—I wish you well."

"I shall endure the most torturing suspense until you have leisure to be more explicit," said the Countess, forgetting, in the agitation of her mind, that her words and manner were both calculated to make the milliner suspect that she had really done

something of a nature which she would fain conceal and which she trembled to have made known.

"Your ladyship sees that I cannot enter into particulars here, nor *at present*," returned Mrs. Brace: then, pausing as if to reflect upon what course it would be better to pursue, and in another moment seeming to be inspired with an idea, she said, "At midnight precisely you can steal from the ball-rooms—on any pretence—no one will perceive you: and if your ladyship will then repair to the extremity of the long passage leading from the great landing, I will be there. But come alone—for to your ear only must I breathe the communication which I have to make."

"I will be there—at midnight—punctually," murmured Eleanor, her voice sounding hoarse and thick. "Give me a glass of water."

The milliner hastened to comply with this demand; and the timpid element went hissing down the parched throat of the Countess of Desborough.

"Is your ladyship better?" inquired Mrs. Brace, as she received back the glass.

"Yes—I thank you," responded Eleanor; and, by a desperate effort, she overcame her emotions. "At all events you assure me," she whispered rapidly to the milliner, "that the evil—whatever it is—can be averted."

"Tranquillise yourself completely on that head, my lady," said Mrs. Brace.

"I will—I must," observed the Countess. "At midnight—punctually."

And having darted a significant look upon the milliner, whose sincerity she no longer thought of doubting, Eleanor turned to rejoin Pauline Clarendon. This young lady's hair had required some little adjustment, which had just engaged the three or four minutes occupied by the above rapidly whispered dialogue between the Countess and Mrs. Brace.

It was now for the first time that the milliner observed that Eleanor's companion was none other than Pauline Clarendon: for when the two ladies had entered the room, Mrs. Brace was so intent upon affording the Countess her officious aid that she had not even thought of darting a glance at the beauteous creature who was with her. But now Mrs. Brace recognised Pauline immediately—not only on account of her marvellous likeness to her sister Octavia, but also from the fact of having seen them together on that morning when Camilla Morton had delivered the note at the house of Lord Florimel.

On thus recognising the younger Miss Clarendon, a painful conviction instantly sprang up in the milliner's mind that something was wrong, and that the plot, as Florimel's letter had warned her, was indeed thickening. But what could she do? Nothing:—matters must take their chance;—and, however great her anxiety and suspense now were, there was no alternative but to await the gradual development of circumstances as they should occur.

In the meantime,—while the bewildered Mrs. Brace was thus giving way to her hurried and agitated reflections,—Eleanor and Pauline had issued from the toilette-chamber and rejoined the Earl: then, the former leaning on his right arm, and the latter on his left, they crossed the landing to the magnificent saloons from the open portals of which streamed the warm and perfumed atmosphere.

Gloriously handsome appeared the Countess of Desborough—bewitchingly beautiful was Pauline Clarendon. The agitation which each experienced—though from such widely different causes—tinged their cheeks with a roseate hue, which set off in more dazzling contrast the fairer and softer tints. But Eleanor's olive complexion looked rich and glowing, though of transparent purity, with her own heightened colour and in that blaze of golden lustre: while nothing could be whiter or more polished in the shape of living flesh than the forehead, neck, and bosom of Miss Clarendon.

How superb was Eleanor in her beauty—how fascinating was Pauline in her loveliness! The former seemed as if she were able to ravish a heart with one glance of her splendid black eyes—the other to steal it away with her soft and witching looks.

And now, as they entered those rooms where all was a blaze of attractions and an assemblage of charms,—yet were they not lost in the bright galaxy: but they stood out from the radiant sphere as stars of an equal glory with Mrs. Fitzherbert, the Duchess of Devonshire, or the Princess Sophia.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE BALL-ROOM.

It was to the Princess Sophia that the Earl of Desborough, the Countess, and Miss Pauline Clarendon, first paid their homage.

Her Royal Highness received Eleanor with a sisterly cordiality, and gave a most kind and flattering welcome to Pauline. Indeed, the ladies and nobles assembled in that apartment were astonished at the extreme air of friendliness and even familiarity with which the Princess proffered her hand to Miss Clarendon; and whisperingly they asked each other who she was.

This query was soon answered by some young nobleman who had seen and admired her at Lord Marchmont's ball; and a general anxiety prevailed to become acquainted with a young lady who appeared to enjoy the highest favour with her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia.

Lord Florimel, who had already arrived, was now speedily by the side of Pauline: but she was not as yet able to take his arm, inasmuch as it was necessary that she should remain with the Earl and Countess of Desborough until after the presentation to the Prince of Wales. Florimel saw that, beneath an exterior apparently calm, a considerable agitation and excitement prevailed in the bosom of the charming creature whom he loved so devotedly; and he seized an opportunity to whisper a few reassuring words in her ears.

"Be not uneasy on my account, dear Gabriel," she hastily but tenderly responded: "there will be no scene—no betrayal of anything extraordinary;—for I am already prepared to know *the worst* in respect to my unfortunate sister."

Florimel threw upon her a look full of affection; and Pauline rapidly returned it, as she again took the proffered arm of the Earl of Desborough, who was now about to conduct herself and the Countess into the presence of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

Amidst the brilliant assemblage they passed;—and in a few minutes they crossed the threshold of the unfolded portals leading into the room where the heir-apparent was conversing, as already described, with

Mrs. Fitzherbert and Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire.

And now Pauline Clarendon summoned all her courage to her aid—nerved herself with all the presence of mind she could possibly command—and exerted every energy to maintain her composure.

Another moment—and she came within view of the Prince of Wales!

From her cheeks fled, in an instant, the rich hues of the rose—a cold tremor struck her as if an ice-shaft had pierced her bosom—and the Earl of Desborough felt her hand sliding from his arm.

"Courage, Miss Clarendon!" he whispered hastily: for the nobleman imagined that she was overawed by the presence of the heir-apparent.

The words recalled Pauline to herself: the colour came back to her cheeks—and she threw another rapid look towards his Royal Highness.

Oh! there was not the faintest possibility of mistake: 'twas he—Mr. Harley—the seducer of her sister!

A dizziness again seized upon Pauline as this conviction burst upon her—or rather as the last glimmering of uncertainty was dissipated in a moment: but with an instinctive or mechanical motion she kept by the Earl's side—measuring her pace to his—leaning lightly upon his arm—and appearing to be embarrassed only by that species of timidity which young ladies are accustomed to feel when introduced into the presence of Royalty.

And now the Earl suddenly stopped short—and Pauline made a low obeisance because she supposed it to be the moment to do so, as indeed it was—and she heard her own name mentioned by the Countess of Desborough who was thus presenting her to his Royal Highness—and then, timidly raising her eyes, she saw in an instant that the Prince was exerting almost superhuman efforts to conceal the trouble which agitated his countenance.

Never, until Pauline's dying-day, did she forget the look which his Royal Highness wore at the moment when their glances thus met. Rage—terror—amazement—confusion—uncertainty how to act, were all depicted upon those lineaments: but quick as the eye could wink, they became composed and settled once more—so that none present save Pauline beheld that evanescent whirlwind of conflicting feelings which swept over his features.

Recovering all his presence of mind—or rather, suddenly arming himself with the courage of desperation—George Prince of Wales addressed a few affable observations to the Countess of Desborough—said something particularly friendly to the Earl—and then, darting upon Pauline a look of peculiar significance, half imploring and half commanding her to be silent with respect to her previous knowledge of him, he at once invited her to open the ball with him.

The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were amazed at this extraordinary and unprecedented proceeding on the part of his Royal Highness; and Mrs. Fitzherbert instantly became scarlet with anger.

For, according to the usual etiquette, the Prince should have opened the ball with some lady of the highest rank: whereas he was about to bestow this exclusive honour upon a plain *Miss*, who was comparatively unknown in the fashionable circles of the metropolis!

No wonder, then, that the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were amazed: but we must add that they were well pleased for Pauline's sake also. Indeed the young lady had become a special favourite with them both; and as the former was not jealous of her royal paramour's proceedings, and as the latter had nothing to be jealous of in that respect, they experienced a generous satisfaction at this brilliant triumph which Pauline was about to enjoy. For, in the courtly circles of those times, it was considered a grand thing for any young lady thus to attract the attention of Royalty: and doubtless the same sickening, nauseating, maudlin sentiment prevails at the present day.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert could scarcely restrain her rage. First she became scarlet—then pale as a sheet; and her superb bosom stood upheaved, with the suspended breath, for nearly a minute, when it began to throb and palpitate tumultuously. For, as ignorant as the others present concerning the motives which could possibly have induced the Prince to accord the honour of his hand to Miss Pauline Clarendon for the first quadrille, Mrs. Fitzherbert naturally supposed that he was smitten with her beauty; and although she knew that he was not a saint, yet this was the first time that he had ever appeared to treat herself with such marked insult and another with such conspicuous favour in her presence.

As for Pauline—overwhelmed with confusion at the unexpected invitation which she had received, she murmured a few scarcely intelligible words of thanks for the honour conferred upon her; and, ere she was half recovered from the bewilderment into which the entire proceeding had thrown her, she found the Prince proffering her his arm to lead her into the adjacent apartment, where the dancing was to take place.

The quadrille was soon formed; and many a titled lady cast envious eyes upon Pauline, as his Royal Highness conducted her amidst the glittering throng to the head of the room.

The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough gave their hands to partners in that first dance, which the Princess Sophia likewise graced with her presence.

But where was Mrs. Fitzherbert? Overcome with a rage to which she dared not however give vent, she had retreated precipitately from the suite of gilded saloons where this magnificent entertainment took place.

"Pauline, I thank you for the forbearance which you exercised towards me ere now," whispered the Prince of Wales, while the gentle symphonies were floating through the rooms. "You have not been attracted hither by the same motive which has brought the other moths to flit around the light of Royalty: you came to clear up a doubt—to confirm a suspicion!" added the heir-apparent, emphatically, although in a low voice: for he now comprehended the meaning of those portions of Lord Florimel's letter which are printed in italic.

"Your Royal Highness thanks me for my forbearance," said Pauline, looking down and speaking in a tremulous tone: "but I deserve no praise for having exercised a proper control over my feelings. Think you that I obtained an introduction hither for the sake of proclaiming my sister's wrongs aloud? No: I am not so insensate," she

added, raising her eyes and fixing them for a moment upon the countenance of the Prince.

"I read a stern decision in your looks, Pauline," he said, with a visible tremor: "what does it mean?"

"It means that justice must be done to my sister—or that her wrongs shall be bitterly avenged," answered Pauline, in reality speaking with a strong emphasis, but still without any excitement being apparent to the eyes of those who stood near.

"Vengeance?—do you talk of vengeance, Pauline?" said the Prince, unable to control an ironical modulation of his voice. "Remember that it is as foolish as it is rude to breathe such a word in the ears of one who can crush his private enemies, as if they were worms."

"Your Royal Highness's sister, the Princess Sophia, will protect and shield me—*for her own sake*," answered Pauline, in a cold, firm, and collected tone.

Fortunate was it for the Prince of Wales that the quadrille commenced at this moment, and that the start which he gave, as Miss Clarendon mentioned his royal sister's name, was thus absorbed as it were in the opening of the Terpsichorean evolutions. For like lightning searing his brain, did the remembrance flash to his imagination that the Princess's frailty was known to Pauline; and this circumstance had escaped his memory and been totally lost sight of during the brief and hurried dialogue which we have just described.

"Pauline," he said, when the arrangements of the dance again allowed them an opportunity of conversing, "it is impossible that we can talk at our ease upon a certain subject this evening. But—tell me—does your sister know that you were to be presented at Carlton House——"

"Octavia entertains not the remotest suspicion of my intention," interrupted Pauline. "She is unaware that I have undertaken the championship of her wrongs—the vindication of the black treachery which has been practised upon her."

"Your words are severe, young lady," said his Royal Highness, with flushing countenance.

"Not more severe than your conduct deserves," responded Pauline, mildly but firmly.

"Well—we will discuss all this on as early an occasion as you choose to appoint," observed the Prince. "But answer me one or two questions, Pauline—for you are not so ungenerous as to leave me in a state of suspense on points of no possible interest to yourself."

"Certainly not," said the young lady. "If your Royal Highness will put those questions——"

"You will answer them? Thanks for the assurance which your words imply. Tell me, then—are the Earl and Countess of Desborough aware of your object in coming hither this evening?"

"On my honour, they are *not*," replied Pauline, emphatically: "they believe that I am instigated by those mingled motives of curiosity and vanity which young ladies naturally entertain in this respect."

"And now tell me whether Lord Florimel——"

"Yes—he is acquainted with *all* my motives," interrupted Pauline. "I will not deceive your Royal Highness in a single point: but at the same time I will assure you that Lord Florimel is incapable of betraying this secret so long as it shall please *me* to keep it and have it kept."

"One word more, Pauline," said his Royal Highness: then, sinking his voice to a whisper which was barely audible, he asked, "Does Lord Florimel know of that adventure at the villa in the Edgeware Road—that adventure, I mean, in which my sister the Princess Sophia——"

"God forbid that I should have betrayed a secret which every sentiment of honour, propriety, and humanity has hitherto enjoined me to keep!" exclaimed Pauline, in a low but emphatic tone.

"You are really a noble-minded girl!" said the Prince, not making the remark in the hope of conciliating Pauline's favour in the affair of her sister, but speaking with a sincerity which he expressed as it were in spite of himself.

Again did the requisitions of the dance compel them to break off their discourse; and as soon as they were once more enabled to resume it, the Prince said, "When and where will you oblige me with an interview, Pauline?"

"I will write to your Royal Highness in the course of a few days," was the answer. "In the meantime, fear not that the breath of scandal shall be allowed to sport with the united names of yourself and Octavia."

"But you will tell Octavia that you have been here to-night?—you will reveal to her that the identity of her lover with the Prince of Wales is no longer subject to a doubt?" said the heir-apparent: "and then she will betray everything in the frantic wildness of her grief——"

"You know, then, that her anguish will be rending in the extreme," interrupted Pauline: "and yet you seem to be more solicitous for your own safety than for the peace of mind of that confiding and innocent girl whom you have ruined. Prince of Wales, I hate you for your inordinate selfishness," added Pauline, in a low but strangely emphatic tone: and for an instant her eyes, usually so melting and tender, shot forth the lightnings of an implacable feeling as she fixed her looks on the countenance of the heir-apparent.

"It is better that we should converse no longer on *this* subject, Miss Clarendon," he said, deeply humiliated, yet unable to resent what he conceived to be the insult conveyed in the spirited young lady's words. "You have promised to write to me—and in the interval," he observed, assuming a kinder tone, "I trust to your goodness to pacify Octavia. Any reparation which it lies within my power to make——"

"Your Royal Highness perceives that the quadrille is now over," interrupted Pauline, coldly: "and, as you yourself have observed, it will be better not to prolong our discourse on a very painful subject."

The Prince of Wales made no reply, but conducted the young lady to a seat, where he left her with a bow. Florimel was almost immediately afterwards by her side; and, with a look full of solicitude, he said, "My beloved Pauline, you have passed through a most painful ordeal—I know you have! That your worst suspicions are confirmed, I am certain—and that the Prince has been talking to you upon the subject, is apparent from your manner."

"Heavens! Gabriel," murmured the young lady, seriously alarmed: "do my looks indicate that the topic of conversation between his Royal Highness and myself was of a serious or unusual nature? If so, a strange and prejudical construction may be put thereon: and it may be supposed," she added, a

deep blush spreading over her countenance, "that I am one of those vain and silly women who would glory in their very frailty so long as it was a Prince that seduced them into error."

"Tranquillise yourself, dearest Pauline," said Florimel: "to the eyes of all this glittering throng there was nothing peculiar in your looks or manner—nothing to encourage a belief that his Royal Highness was addressing you otherwise than in the usual strain of empty compliment and frivolous gallantry which prevail at such scenes as this. But to me, Pauline—to me, who am your lover—your adorer—your intended husband,—and who likewise was aware of the motive which brought you hither,—to me, I say, it was different; and I saw that your cheeks flushed sometimes—then grew pale suddenly,—I saw also that you were profoundly excited in reality, though wearing an exterior of calmness and tranquillity. Yes—all this I observed, my Pauline—and I pitied you."

"Dearest Gabriel! your kind words recompense me for much of the pain which I have just endured," said the young lady. "But we shall be observed if we continue to discourse in a style that is naturally accompanied by a kindred seriousness of the countenance. Come," she added, a brilliant smile animating her lovely features; "give me your arm and let us take our place in the quadrille which is now forming—for I presume that we are to dance together this time."

And the bright and beautiful pair rose from their seats to join the second quadrille.

In the meantime the Prince of Wales, on leaving Pauline, bethought himself of the sudden and abrupt manner in which he had left Mrs. Fitzherbert some twenty minutes previously; and it now struck him that she was probably offended at the favour which he had shown to Miss Clarendon in selecting her as his partner, instead of some lady of high rank, for the first quadrille.

Returning, therefore, to the room where he had previously been seated with Mrs. Fitzherbert, he looked round for her in vain; and having traversed the entire suite of splendid saloons without perceiving her, he accosted the Duchess of Devonshire for information.

Drawing her Grace aside from a group of ladies with whom she was conversing, the Prince said, "Where is Mrs. Fitzherbert?"

"Indeed, I have not seen her since the commencement of the first quadrille," answered Georgiana. "And now that I recollect, she did not dance——"

"I can understand it all," interrupted the Prince, in a tone of vexation: "she is offended with me, because I chose to honour Miss Pauline Clarendon by selecting her for that quadrille—and she has doubtless retired to her own apartment in a pet. Now, my dear Georgiana, you must go and persuade her to return ere her absence be so prolonged as to occasion unpleasant comment."

"I had rather that your Royal Highness would find me a more agreeable employment," said the Duchess, pouting her beauteous lips: "for to tell you the truth," she added, sinking her voice to a low whisper, and fixing upon him a significant look, "it is no pleasant task to act as peace-maker between husband and wife."

"Georgiana," said the Prince, likewise in a low tone, but with almost a savage emphasis, and certainly with a ferocious look, "I command you not to speak thus of myself and Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"I was only anxious to hear what you would say in reply," observed the sprightly Duchess, by no means abashed, but with an enchanting gaiety of tone and manner and a species of wicked, mischief-loving archness which rendered her beautiful countenance absolutely radiant at the moment. "However," she exclaimed, tapping the Prince's arm with her fan,—"since I have rendered you angry, I will endeavour to atone for my indiscretion by acting as a peace-maker between your Royal Highness and Mrs Fitzherbert."

With these words, the Duchess of Devonshire turned away and quitted the room in order to seek the private apartments of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and the Prince of Wales, at that moment catching a glimpse of the Countess of Desborough's fine figure as she moved with mingled elegance and grace through the labyrinthine dance, was reminded of the plot he had set afloat in regard to her.

We have already observed that Eleanor looked perfectly splendid on the present occasion; and the royal voluptuary was fired with a devouring passion as his eyes now followed that magnificent form which seemed to glow with all the ardour of its own temperament beneath the exciting influence of the Muse Terpsichore.

Anxious to learn whether Mrs. Brace had succeeded in playing the part entrusted to her, the Prince quitted the ball-room—traversed the landing—and entered a private chamber, where a page was in attendance. This youth was despatched to summon Mrs. Brace to his royal master's presence; and in a few minutes the milliner made her appearance.

"What news concerning the charming Eleanor?" said the Prince, the moment they were alone together.

"Her ladyship has completely fallen into the snare," responded the unprincipled woman; "and she will meet me at midnight in the appointed place."

"So far, so good!" exclaimed his Royal Highness: then, referring to his watch, he observed, "It is now half-past eleven o'clock—mind you are punctual at your post."

"Fear nothing on that head," returned Mrs. Brace. "So far as the matter depends upon me, the beautiful Countess of Desborough will be in your power! That she also will be punctual, I have no doubt: for the mysterious words which, according to your instructions, I breathed in her ears, produced a magical effect. With all her pride and display of virtue, that haughty lady is not immaculate: conscious of some frailty, she trembles lest her secret be already known. Otherwise she would never have fallen into the trap which has this night been set to ensnare her."

"O charming Eleanor," exclaimed the Prince, carried away by the violence of his licentious longing,—"within an hour shall I clasp thee in my arms—within an hour shall I have revelled in thy beauties!"

"And is it possible that your Royal Highness can thus give free course to these thoughts and hopes, while a terrible danger appears to be menacing you?" demanded Mrs. Brace: "for surely you must have already seen Pauline Clarendon here to-night?—and can her visit bode any good to you?"

"I have seen her—and no danger is to be apprehended for the moment," answered the Prince.

"But she knows your Royal Highness to be Mr. Hartley—or Mr. Hartley to be your Royal Highness —whichever you choose?" exclaimed the milliner.

"Yes—yes: all *that* she knows perfectly," said the heir-apparent; "and a very extraordinary girl she is. Gifted with a remarkable spirit—great presence of mind—and wonderful courage, she can defy, dare, and threaten a Prince. Nay, more—to my very face she told me that she hated me."

"And yet your Royal Highness declares that there is no danger!" cried Mrs. Bruce, in a species of bewilderment.

"Not for the present, I tell you," exclaimed George, who was a firm believer in the Christian maxim which says, *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.* "Pauline will let me know very shortly what she wishes me to do in her sister's matter;—and when the time comes—why—*then* we'll think about it. You know I am not a man who meets misfortune half-way: I hate anticipating evil;—'tis bad enough when it comes. And now, my dear Fanny, I must thank you for the aid you have rendered me in my scheme respecting Lady Desborough."

With these words, his Royal Highness imprinted a kiss upon the lips of the handsome milliner; and, having once more conjured her to be punctual at the place of appointment, he sped back to the brilliant saloons where the dancing was going on with increasing spirit.

The Duchess of Devonshire had already returned thither; and the Prince was speedily by her side.

"What news, my dear Georgiana?" demanded he.

"I cannot find Mrs. Fitzherbert in her apartments," answered the Duchess. "She is not there—and I am assured, in answer to the inquiries which I made, that her servants have not seen her since the commencement of the ball."

"Very strange!" ejaculated the Prince: then, in a calmer and far more indifferent tone, he observed, "But there are plenty of other rooms in Carlton House to which she could have retired for the purpose of enjoying her sulks;—and I shall not trouble myself farther in the matter. Thanks however, Georgiana, to you for your kindness in endeavouring to seek her."

The Prince remained in conversation with the charming and sprightly Duchess for about ten minutes longer—at the expiration of which period he again quitted the brilliant saloons.

CHAPTER LXXV.

ANOTHER SCENE AT CARLTON HOUSE.

The Countess of Desborough had appeared radiantly beautiful to all eyes; but that carnation glow which suffused her cheeks with its richest hue, was heightened by the conflicting emotions that warred within her bosom, as well as by the effort which she made to conceal them.

In the little leisure which the excitement of the brilliant scene and the gay dance left her to commune with herself, she had vainly endeavoured to conjecture what could be the aim and nature of the mysterious warning given her by Mrs. Bruce. Was it possible that her frailty with the individual whom she knew as Gustavus Wakefield, and whom she already loved with an earnest and devoted affection,—was it possible that this frailty could be known, or even suspected! And if not, then how could her fair fame be menaced?—and how could evil or danger be threatening her? Lastly, whatever were the peril, how happened it that Mrs. Bruce, of all women in the world, should be able and willing to rescue her from its consequences?

These thoughts swept, with whirlwind speed, many times through the brain of the Countess of Desborough during the evening: but the oftener they recurred to her mind, the more bewildering did they seem—and the less easy was it to hazard a conjecture upon a single point.

Tortured with the cruellest suspense—harassed with the most painful misgiving—at one moment fearful that some treachery was intended—at another experiencing a full revival of confidence in the sincerity of the milliner,—now trembling lest the Prince of Wales himself should be at the bottom of the whole affair—then reassuring herself with the argument that he would never dare to devise any plot or perpetrate any outrage against her beneath his own roof and on such an occasion as the present,—at one time resolving to treat the thing with contempt—at another deciding upon keeping the appointment,—now painfully recalling to mind the milliner's former misconduct and duplicity—then starting at the recollection of the solemn and impressive manner in which the warning was given,—thus, torn with a thousand conflicting sentiments, the Countess of Desborough knew not how to act.

At length—when still undecided—her eyes encountered a time-piece: the hands marked midnight!

Rapidly sweeping her looks around, she saw that her husband was conversing at a distance with some other noblemen—that the Duchess of Devonshire was talking to Pauline Clarendon and Florimel—and that the Princess Sophia was engaged with a group of ladies in another quarter.

For the first time during the evening did the Countess, therefore, now find herself so entirely alone, as it were—amidst the brilliant throng—that she could escape without being perceived from the saloons.

Should she go?—should she keep the appointment?

Yes: an invincible feeling urged her to adopt the affirmative course—for her conscience, making a coward of her in one sense, prompted her to hasten and learn the nature of the peril which threatened her.

Behold her issuing forth from the gorgeous saloons. There are servants on the landing—in the ante-chambers: but what of that? She may be going to the toilette-room or to Mrs. Fitzherbert's apartments. It does not, therefore, seem strange that she should thus have left the saloons—alone!

The passage is gained: lightly and rapidly she threads it. Mrs. Bruce is waiting for her at the end. The milliner places her finger with mysterious significance upon her lip—and hastily throws open a door. Eleanor crosses the threshold: the door closes noiselessly behind her.

But, without perceiving that she is alone—indeed, fancying that the milliner is following her—she traverses a small ante-chamber lighted by a lamp held in the hand of an alabaster statue. An open door faces her: she unhesitatingly enters the apartment with which it communicates;—but scarcely has she crossed the threshold when this

door is likewise closed behind her—and she is clasped in the arms of the Prince of Wales!

Eleanor saw that she was betrayed: but, without giving vent to shrieks or screams,—she was too courageous a woman for such an ebullition of pusillanimous feeling,—she disengaged herself with a desperate effort from his arms. Then, rapidly smoothing her disordered hair, she said in a low tone of remarkable decision, "I will sooner perish than become your victim!"

And her magnificent eyes darted forth lightnings upon the countenance of the heir-apparent.

"Haughty lady, you are in my power," he exclaimed, nothing discomfitted; "and no human aid can rescue you therefrom."

"What means your Royal Highness?" demanded Eleanor, drawing her fine form up to its full height, and assuming a bearing so splendid and queen-like in its dignified indignation, that for a few moments the unprincipled voluptuary was indeed overawed. "What means your Royal Highness?" she repeated, in a voice that trembled not: then, sweeping her eyes rapidly around, and perceiving that it was a bed-chamber to which foul treachery had thus inveigled her, she said, "If you intend to exert brute force to retain me here, then will I resist you to the utmost of my power. There are windows," she continued, pointing towards the casements; "and I will summon assistance thence. If no succour should come, I will precipitate myself therefrom sooner than become the victim of a miscreant voluptuary such as you!"

"By heaven! your words would provoke me strangely, proud and self-sufficient lady," exclaimed the Prince,—"were you not so completely in my power that I can take full and ample vengeance upon you. But, oh! you are so handsome—so divinely beautiful," he said, his voice suddenly assuming a melting tone and his countenance a tender expression,—"that I would not for worlds remain your enemy if you would only permit me to be your friend."

"My friend! repeated the Countess, with bitter irony: "is it to insult and mock one whom you have already cruelly outraged, that you use those words? But I understand you, Prince of Wales!" she exclaimed in a nobler, bolder, and loftier tone, while her countenance became lighted up with an animation that gave her the aspect of an avenging goddess:—"yes—I understand you now! You imagine that because you are his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales—eldest son of the King of England—and heir-apparent to the throne on which that monarch sits,—you imagine, I say, that because you have only one more step to ascend in order to reach the pinnacle of earthly splendour and grasp the sceptre of an empire upon which the sun never sets,—you imagine that because the accident of birth has placed you in a position so proud as this, you have a right to trample upon all those usages, customs, or proprieties which may militate against your own selfish pleasures. Yes—this is your arrogance—this is your presumption. You fancy yourself a god—whereas you are but a very miserable and despicable man!"

So astounded was the Prince of Wales at being thus addressed, that he stood gazing in stupid wonderment upon the brave and spirited lady who dared to read him such a lesson: and this, let the reader recollect, was the second time that he had been reproved and set at defiance by female lips upon the memorable evening whose incidents we are describing.

"I have heard of Republican writers and Democratic speakers," continued the Countess of Desborough; "and hitherto I have been inclined to join in the common hatred which animates the aristocracy against them. But hear me, Prince of Wales—hear me while I solemnly proclaim and declare that I now cease to wonder that men should desire to abolish Monarchy and level thrones, when I think how vile, corrupt, and profligate Kings and Princes generally are. And now," she added, abruptly turning towards the door, "you will detain me at your peril."

"The door is locked," said the Prince, with a smile in which vindictive malignity and gloating licentiousness were strangely commingled. "I was concealed behind it when you entered—and expecting a scene, I took the precaution to secure it."

Thus speaking, he leant upon the mantel-piece and surveyed the Countess with the insolent freedom of a libertine and the cowardly menace of a bully.

"You are a villain!" she exclaimed, her face, neck, and bosom becoming scarlet with indignation. "Suffer me to depart—or I will no longer hesitate to raise my voice and summon assistance by my screams."

"The shrillest scream and the loudest shriek," said the Prince of Wales, in a tone of cold and ferocious triumph, "will not penetrate beyond these four walls. There are double casements to those windows: between this inner door and the outer one there is an ante-chamber. Scream, then—shriek—beauteous Eleanor—and all will be in vain!"

"Then will I resist you with my teeth—my nails!" exclaimed the Countess, her eyes shooting forth fiery arrows upon the Prince.

"Never have you appeared to me more lovely—more enchanting—more desirable than now," said his Royal Highness, perfectly unmoved by that threat. "Your cheeks blush a more delicious red with the fury of indignation—your eyes are as bright as meteors—your lips are of a livelier scarlet—and the teeth shine between them like dazzling pearls. Oh! you are a divine, a heavenly creature, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor;—far, far more beauteous at this moment than when you lay reclining in my arms upon the sofa at your own dwelling, and when I might have become the master of your charms had opportunity then served. In the name of God! why not manifest equal kindness towards me now?—wherefore compel me to wrest by force those enjoyments which it were paradise to have yielded voluntarily?"

"I confess that there was a time when—in a moment of weakness—I forgot my own dignity in your presence," said the Countess: "but, thank heaven! your triumph was not complete—nor shall it ever be!"

"And yet the proud and haughty Eleanor cannot look me in the face and declare that she has never proved faithless to her husband—never embraced a lover in her arms!" exclaimed the Prince of Wales, fixing a searching look upon the lady's countenance.

"What mean you?—what——"

And Eleanor, gasping for breath, supported herself by clinging to the mantel.

"Ah! then my surmise was not wrong?" cried the Prince, in a triumphant tone. "Oh! I am well acquainted with the world, Eleanor—well experienced in the female heart. The moment I learnt ere now that you had yielded to the device set to ensnare you, I felt assured that it was a conscious guilt which had made you coward enough to seek to know more. Were you an innocent woman, against whom scandal could not even raise its breath, you would have treated Mrs. Brace and her intrigues with disdain. Nay—those intrigues would have appeared so transparent that you must have seen through them in a moment."

"You are adding the grossest insult to the most wanton injury," murmured the unhappy Eleanor, her courage and presence of mind failing her rapidly.

"Had you not treated *me* with insult on that night when you promised to admit me to your chamber," said the Prince, "there never would have been a word or a look of anger or disagreement between us. But, because a certain incident took place—as unforeseen as it was unfortunate—you barred your door against me. Think you, haughty lady, that I had no feelings to wound—no bitter disappointment to endure? Assuredly I had: and it was in consequence of the cruel—heartless—capricious treatment which I then experienced at your hands, that I resolved to make you mine sooner or later. And now, Lady Desborough—since it appears to be *my* turn to speak at length," he continued in a tone of enhanced triumph,—"I crave your attention."

"My God! suffer me to depart!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, glancing in wild terror around the room.

"Listen, I say!" cried the Prince emphatically. "Upon *my* absence from the ball-rooms no one will dare to comment: upon *your* absence, on the contrary, strange whispers and remarks will speedily

circulate. The absence of *both of us* at the same time cannot fail to engender certain suspicions;—and I leave you to judge whether they will be more prejudicial to you or to me. Now, beauteous Eleanor, do you begin to see the position in which you are placed?"

"And despair nerves me with courage!" suddenly ejaculated the lovely woman, who did indeed appear lovelier still in her indignation. "You may keep me a prisoner here, Prince of Wales," she cried, darting looks of defiance at the heir-apparent: "but I take God to witness that, be the consequences what they may, the first use I shall make of my liberty will be to hasten into the presence of a magistrate or a judge and demand whether there be no law to reach even your Royal Highness."

"You are talking nonsense—utter nonsense, Eleanor!" said George, his lips curling with contempt. "In the first place, Kings, Queens, Princes, and Princesses may do just what they please—for they are *above* the law and *stronger* than the law; and the law was only made to keep the millions in subjection to *them!* Think you, then, that magistrates or judges would dare to entertain a charge against a Prince? No—no: they would sooner hang ten thousand innocent working-men, than even venture upon a reprimand to a guilty scion of Royalty."

"But if you detain me here—by force—against my will," exclaimed Eleanor, "the scandal—the shame—the infamy that will result——"

"Can all be dispersed and set at rest in a moment," interrupted his Royal Highness, with a promptitude showing that he had well considered the subject. "For how stands the matter? Mrs. Brace will step forward and declare that she managed the whole intrigue—that the Countess of Desborough of her own accord proceeded to a certain bed-chamber where she met the Prince of Wales—and that it is a mere maudlin sentiment of compunction, or else a feeling of jealousy, which makes her turn round upon her royal paramour to denounce him. There, Eleanor—the story is cut and dried—all in readiness;—and you see that everything can be accounted for as naturally as possible."

"Yes—I indeed perceive that you are capable of any villany," exclaimed the Countess, darting a look of deadly hatred upon the Prince of Wales. "I already knew you to be profligate—extravagant—selfish—ungrateful—and heartless: but it was reserved for the incident of this night to teach me that you are a villain."

"The sooner I close that abusive mouth with kisses the better!" cried the Prince, with a voice and look of vindictive triumph;—and, extending his arms, he rushed towards the Countess.

"Hold!" ejaculated a full-toned female voice;—and from behind the curtains of the bed stepped forth a lady whose flashing eyes, crimson countenance, and quivering lips proclaimed a rage not easy to be appeased.

It was Mrs. Fitzherbert!

A cry of joy and triumph burst from the lips of the Countess of Desborough: but a terrible oath—an imprecation so fearful that we dare not attempt to record it—fell from the tongue of the Prince of Wales.

"Madam, you have doubtless heard all that has passed between his Royal——I mean, between *this man*," exclaimed Eleanor, pointing disdainfully and oathingly at the Prince,—"and myself?"

"Yes—every syllable," answered Mrs. Fitzherbert, darting furious glances on the heir-apparent, who folded his arms, leant against the mantel, and endeavoured to assume an air of indifference.

"You will therefore agree with me, madam," continued the Countess, "that I have been subjected to an outrage as vile as the spirit which suggested it must be cowardly and despicable?"

"We will not use hard words, if your ladyship pleases," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, bending a severe look upon Eleanor; "for, according to one portion of the dialogue which ere now took place between yourself and his Royal Highness, it would appear that he has received some considerable amount of encouragement on the part of your ladyship. Nay—it would even seem," she added, with a caustic emphasis, "that on one particular occasion his Royal Highness should have become the partner of your ladyship's bed, had not some unforeseen incident prevented so agreeable a result."

"Madam," said the Countess of Desborough, recovering all her dignity, and fixing her magnificent eyes with grand effect upon Mrs. Fitzherbert,—"if you yourself be immaculate, then wherefore is it that you are not styled her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales?—but if, on the other hand, you have no claim to that distinction, how dare you undertake the part of moralist with me? Tell me that you are the wife of his Royal Highness, and you will then bring a blush to my cheek, and I shall fall upon my knees and implore your pardon for ever having wronged you in thought, though never in deed: but if you be only Mrs. Fitzherbert—the mistress of the heir-apparent——"

"Silence, madam!" cried the lady whom Eleanor thus boldly addressed in such words of sarcasm: then, stamping her foot imperiously, Mrs. Fitzherbert drew herself up to her full height—and, in a tone and manner of the loftiest dignity, she exclaimed, "It is time that your ladyship should learn whom you have insulted and outraged—for I am indeed her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales!"

"My God! what have you said?—what madness have you perpetrated?" exclaimed the heir-apparent, suddenly becoming fearfully excited: and, seizing Mrs. Fitzherbert—for so we had better continue to call her, inasmuch as she was never known by any higher name to the world,—seizing her by the wrist, we say, the Prince muttered in a low, hoarse, and thick tone, "I am aware that my conduct has been bad this evening towards you: but your vengeance is terrible in the extreme! For by proclaiming yourself to be my wife, you have endangered my very heritage of the British crown!"

A deadly pallor came over the countenance of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she was thus painfully reminded of the tremendous indiscretion of which she had been guilty: but almost instantly recovering her presence of mind, she took the Countess of Desborough's hands in both her own, saying, "Let us pardon each other for the harsh words which we have exchanged—and let us henceforth be friends."

"Oh! cheerfully—cheerfully!" cried the generous-hearted Eleanor, in a tone of fervent sincerity. "Your Royal Highness——"

"Hush!" exclaimed the other: "you must never fail to call me *Mrs. Fitzherbert!* I will not ask you to swear to keep this secret—because I know that your ladyship is a woman of honour, and it would be an insult to exact a vow to that effect: but I will

implore you—by that friendship which I now proffer you and which I ask you to vouchsafe me in return ——"

"Fear not, dear lady, that I shall ever breathe a word calculated to give you offence," interrupted the Countess of Desborough: then, without deigning even to notice the Prince of Wales, she said, "You will have the kindness to accompany me back to the ball rooms; so that, if my absence has been perceived, it may be supposed that I have been in your society during the interval."

"Certainly," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, instantly recognising the prudence of the step thus suggested; then, turning towards the Prince of Wales, she said in a cold tone of reproach, "Have you no apology to offer to this generous-hearted lady?"

"The Countess of Desborough will accept none at my hands," said the heir-apparent, doggedly.

"It were a miserable affectation on my part—indeed, it would amount to a piece of sycophancy of which I am utterly incapable," observed Eleanor, "were I to declare that any apology, however humble, could appease the indignation which I experience. On *that* head, therefore, my dear Mrs. Fitzherbert, let no more be said. Henceforth the Prince of Wales will treat me with ceremonious courtesy—and I shall behave towards him with reserved and cold respect. Let such be the understanding; and on that condition, I shall never breathe a word relative to the incidents of this night. And it will be the fault of his Royal Highness," she added significantly, "if I do not carry the secret thereof to my grave."

"I understand your ladyship," said the Prince, assuming a stern and haughty air: "but be well assured that, after everything which has passed in this chamber within the last half-hour, I am now led to hate you as cordially as ever I felt interested in you."

"The hatred of your Royal Highness will prove much more tolerable to me than your love," exclaimed Eleanor, the natural pride and dignity of her sex dictating this cutting taunt.

And the Prince felt the withering sarcasm and writhed under it—although he affected to turn aside and hum an opera-air. But, Oh! for *him*—the worshipped, idolised, and deified heir-apparent to be thus treated with indifference,—for *him*—the handsomest man and most fascinating gentleman in Europe to be thus spurned as it were by that indignant and haughty but noble-minded lady,—Oh! it was intolerable;—and the very tune which he affected to hum, hissed between his lips like a reptile's craving for vengeance!

But, without waiting to observe the result which her retort had produced, the Countess of Desborough unlocked the door—threw it open—and made way for Mrs. Fitzherbert to pass. But this lady whispered, with a half-smile, "Remember that I am not to be known by you as the Princess of Wales;"—and the Countess accordingly went forth first, Mrs. Fitzherbert following close behind.

The ante-chamber was traversed, and Eleanor was about to open the outer-door, when the Prince of Wales suddenly exclaimed, "Stop for a single moment!"

The two ladies paused accordingly: but Mrs. Fitzherbert only turned towards him.

And it was to her that a sudden idea had prompted him to utter a few words.

"You are about to seek again the company whom I have invited to Carlton House this evening," he said, in a low and impressive tone. "Now, it either becomes necessary for me to return amongst them also—or for you to circulate a rumour of sudden indisposition as a plea for my absence."

"And wherefore can you not return to the ball-rooms—*presently?*" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a cold tone, and with a strong emphasis upon the last word, as much as to imply that he must not think of offering to accompany herself and Eleanor, as his presence would not be otherwise than displeasing to the latter.

"Yes—I will return presently," said the Prince,—"if I am assured that I shall not become the focus for your angry looks."

"Would you have me *very* amiable towards you?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of bitter irony. "Oh! you deserve it ——"

"Perdition!—begone—leave me!" ejaculated his Royal Highness: and retreating, in a towering rage, into the bed-chamber, he slammed the door violently.

"Come, dear Lady Desborough," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, exercising wonderful command over her feelings: "we must saunter back to the ball-rooms with countenances as serene and smiling as if nothing unusual had occurred. It may be that some of my friends have been to seek me in my own apartments—and we will therefore say, if questioned, that we have visited the picture-gallery. By the bye, that young lady whom you introduced this evening is a sweet pretty creature," observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, casting a rapid and searching glance at Eleanor's countenance, in order to ascertain if there had been any particular motive in presenting Pauline Clarendon to the Prince.

"She is not only beautiful—but as amiable and virtuous as she is lovely," said the Countess. "In a few weeks she will become Lady Florimel."

"So much the better," thought Mrs. Fitzherbert "for the Prince was certainly struck with her."

But she did not breathe these sentiments aloud;—and now the two ladies once more entered the glittering sphere of beauty, rank, and fashion.

Mrs. Fitzherbert's intimate knowledge of the Prince's disposition enabled her to judge that he would not return to the ball-rooms again that night,—but that he would retire to his own apartments and drown his disappointment, rage, and humiliation in the bottle or the punch-bowl: she accordingly spread the report that his Royal Highness had been seized with a sudden indisposition; and the entertainment therefore broke up at an earlier hour than it would otherwise have done.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

A STRANGE VISITRESS.—A WELCOME PROPOSAL.

THE scene now changes to Mr. Clarendon's house in Carendish Square.

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the morning—breakfast was over—and the father, leaving his two lovely daughters in the parlour, retired to a room which had been fitted up as his library or study.

Mr. Clarendon's countenance has already been described as thin, sallow, and having an indelible stamp of melancholy traced upon its lineaments; but it now appeared actually care-worn and expressed

all the indications of a mind ill at ease. Nevertheless, in the presence of his daughters he assumed a certain appearance of gaiety—or rather of composure and tranquillity—which led them to believe that he had naught to vex or annoy him;—and it was only when alone that his features fell, as it were, into an aspect mournfully harmonising with the real state of his thoughts.

Thus was it on the morning of which we are writing; and which was the one following the grand entertainment at Carlton House:—for, having chatted at the breakfast-table with his daughters in a manner that might be termed almost cheerful, he retired to his library to give way to the most melancholy reflections.

Indeed, Mrs. Brace, the wily milliner of Pall Mall, had not been misled by her worldly experience when she conjectured—without ever having seen Mr. Clarendon in her life—that he felt his present position to be altogether a false one.

And such it indeed was: for he had only been acknowledged as a relative and well treated by Lord Marchmont at a time when circumstances seemed to proclaim him as the heir to the old peerage and the fine estates which were the appanage of that rank; —but now that the Hon. Arthur Eaton was completely recovered from his perilous and mysterious malady, it had already struck Mr. Clarendon that Lord Marchmont was growing colder and colder towards him each time they met. True it was that Arthur's manner became more friendly and cordial, if possible, every day—and he *was* almost a diurnal visitor at the house in Cavendish Square: but still the young gentleman's amiability recompensed not Mr. Clarendon for the old lord's increasing indifference.

What, then, was to be done? To return to his cottage and his comparative penury, was an idea too galling for Mr. Clarendon to entertain for many minutes at a time—although there were occasions when he *did* contemplate it seriously, considering it to be preferable to the painful alternative of living as it were upon a species of eleemosynary charity—or at all events, in an utter dependence on his haughty relative. But, no—he could not calmly and deliberately consent to abandon the improved position in which circumstances had placed him after so long and severe a struggle with the world. Besides, was not Pauline engaged to marry a young peer of immense wealth?—and might not Octavia hope to form an equally brilliant match?

So at least Mr. Clarendon thought: and, looking upon the world and all its denizens with that distrust which a long series of misfortunes invariably engenders in the human mind, he feared lest his daughters' prospects should be ruined were his own position in society to undergo any alteration for the worst. He knew not that Florimel, for instance, had loved Pauline when she was an obscure, humble, and unknown maiden, or that he now loved her for her own sake alone: on the contrary, he fancied that if Pauline were to return to the villa in the Edgeware Road and lay aside her silk dress to resume a cotton one, she would not then appear sufficiently beautiful in the young nobleman's eyes to compensate for her own want of fortune and the penury of her sire.

These considerations, therefore, induced Mr. Clarendon to cling to the position in which Lord Marchmont had so suddenly, and under such peculiar circumstances, placed him: but still he felt that it was a position not only false and embarrassing, but even cruel. For the allowance of a thousand a-year might be withdrawn by Lord Marchmont in any moment of caprice; and even if it were continued until this old nobleman's death, there might be no stipulation in his will to ensure its subsequent payment. True it was that Arthur Eaton appeared to have conceived a great attachment towards the Clarendon family: but he was young—he might marry, and thus bestow his sympathies elsewhere—or a thousand other circumstances might tend to induce him to stop the pecuniary allowance now made.

All these considerations were perplexing and vexatious enough: but even that did not constitute the sum of Mr. Clarendon's painful reflections. For was it a small thing that a peerage should have been snatched, as it were, from his very grasp?—was it a trifling matter that a coronet should have descended to within an inch of his brow and then have been suddenly withdrawn? Yet such was the fact:—a few weeks back—and Arthur Eaton appeared to hover on the very verge of the grave. Death seemed to hold him in his grasp—and thus the frailest, weakest barrier in the world alone stood between Mr. Clarendon and the heirship-apparent to the Marchmont title and estates.

But how speedily was the aspect of circumstances changed! Death released its hold upon the victim who seemed past all human redemption; and Arthur Eaton was rapidly returning to a new and vigorous state of existence. Mr. Clarendon's hopes, at one time so brilliant, were thus doomed to experience a terrible annihilation;—and it was not without the bitterest pangs and the most intense secret anguish that this man, naturally ambitious and of an aristocratic mind, beheld the downfall of that glorious fabric which circumstances had justified his imagination in building up.

Upon retiring to his library on the morning whereof we are now writing, Mr. Clarendon fell into the train of thoughts which we have just sketched:—and in this painful reverie had he been wrapt for nearly half-an-hour, when a domestic entered to announce that a lady, who refused to give her name, desired an immediate interview with him.

He ordered the servant to show the visitress into the library; and when she made her appearance, he was immediately struck by the mingled elegance, dignity, and grace which characterised her form: but her countenance Mr. Clarendon could not see—for it was carefully concealed by a thick black veil so folded as to render it impossible to catch a glimpse of the features through the transparency of the lace.

That she was young, he had not the slightest doubt—for her figure possessed all the symmetry of youthfulness: the waist was very slender—the shoulders had a fine width and an admirable slope —the bust was well-formed without being exuberant—and she walked with that lightness yet firmness of step which finely proportioned limbs can alone command. Besides, her feet and ankles, peeping beneath her dark silk dress, were small even to a fault—and the hands, though imprisoned in black kid gloves, were evidently modelled with a corresponding delicacy and perfection.

Mr. Clarendon placed a chair for her accommo-

dation; and, resuming his own seat, he waited with no inconsiderable degree of curiosity for the first words that should fall from her lips.

"Scarcely knowing how to introduce the object of my visit, Mr. Clarendon," said the veiled lady, in a voice rich with all the soft melody and beautiful with all the harmonious freshness of youth,—"I must commence by apologising for this intrusion. But you will pardon me if I neither reveal my name nor raise my veil upon the present occasion. Indeed, my business with you is full of mystery——"

"But of what nature is that business, Miss—or Madam—for I know not by which distinction to address you," interrupted Mr. Clarendon, not altogether liking the opening scene in this strange interview.

"Call me *Miss*, if you will," said the lady. "And do not," she immediately exclaimed, "imbibe any hasty notion to my prejudice, on account of the mystery with which it at present suits me to envelope myself. It may be that we shall become far more intimately connected: on the other hand it may be that we shall part presently—never to meet again."

"And on what do these alternatives depend?" inquired Mr. Clarendon, a strange and unaccountable feeling coming over him,—a feeling made up of something more than mingled surprise, curiosity, and suspense,—one of those mystic and superhuman sensations, in fine, which visit us but once or twice during our lives, but which, when they *do* shed their influence over us, seem to warn us that we have reached some point or crisis in our destiny which will decide the whole current and channel of the future flow of existence.

"You ask on what those alternatives depend?" repeated the veiled lady: and Mr. Clarendon knew by her attitude and manner that she was fixing her eyes upon him searchingly through her veil. "They depend solely on yourself," she added, after a pause of nearly a minute.

"Madam, allow me to tell you frankly that the mystery which you are adopting begins to be irksome and embarrassing to me," said Mr. Clarendon. "If you wish to speak to me on some private matter, I will pledge my word most sacredly and my honour most solemnly to look upon the communication as confidential and secret."

"And if that communication were of a startling character?" said the lady, in a tone of inquiry.

"These are times when it requires a great deal to startle anybody," responded Mr. Clarendon.

"Am I to understand that *your* experience of the world is such as to render it difficult either to startle or shock you?" demanded the mysterious unknown.

"I need not hesitate to answer you in the affirmative," said Mr. Clarendon, who failed not to comprehend that his visitress was seeking for encouragement to proceed. "Yes—my acquaintance with the world is not of the most pleasant description; and I have seen enough to convince me that heartlessness and selfishness thrive the best, while generosity and honour fall lamentably into the background. I liken Generosity to a man who commits slow suicide by means of infinitesimal doses of poison, which however must prove eventually fatal: for Generosity ruins and destroys itself, to reap nothing but ingratitude. As for Honour—'tis a mere word," added Mr. Clarendon, with intense bitterness, "which every man and every class of men interpret differently."

"Ah! now I begin to understand you better—and I am glad that you have made these observations," said the lady. "You have evidently been taught by experience to look upon the world as the arena in which selfish interests wage a more terrible conflict than that of the Roman gladiators. And you are right, Mr. Clarendon. But, having adopted these views, you would doubtless feel grateful to any one who might point out the means of ameliorating your own condition?"

"By heaven! I would worship such a friend as if it were an angel sent from heaven!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon: then, almost repenting of the enthusiasm into which his feelings had at the moment betrayed him, he said in a different and colder tone, "But wherefore do you put such strange questions to me? If you know aught of my circumstances——"

"I know everything!" interrupted the veiled visitress. "I am well acquainted with all the details of your position—and I am convinced, after the admissions you have already made, that it is painful and intolerable to a degree."

"But it may be dangerous for me *to make further admissions* to you, lady!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Clarendon, fearful that he had been guilty of some imprudence in expressing with such freedom his ideas of the world and the views resulting from his experience of it. "Before we continue a discourse which has taken so strange a turn, permit me to inquire who you are?"

"I have already warned you that it will neither suit my purposes to reveal my name or raise my veil upon the present occasion," said the lady, in a firm and decisive tone. "Indeed, our interview may as well end here," she added, rising abruptly from her seat: then, again appearing to scan Mr Clarendon's features with an earnest attention through her closely folded veil, she observed in a low, solemn, and mysterious tone, "That you are discontented, I perceive: but whether you have the courage to undertake the work which can alone place you on that eminence to which your ambition aspires, I am unable at present to judge. If you do indeed possess that courage, I am willing to aid you upon certain conditions. Therefore, whether we shall meet again must depend upon yourself. For the remainder of this week and throughout the next shall I each morning look into the *Times* newspaper: if no communication be made to me through its advertising columns, I shall conclude that you are a mere grumbler who dares not act—a poltroon who can complain but who lacks the energy necessary to improve his condition and accomplish his desires. On the other hand, if a communication should appear in that journal, addressed to the '*Veiled Lady*,' it will instantaneously be attended to. Farewell."

And, with this abrupt peroration, the mysterious visitress quitted the room, leaving Mr. Clarendon so completely a prey to the profoundest amazement that he remained fixed as it were in his chair, unable to rise and perform the usual courteous ceremony of opening the door of the apartment or ringing the bell for a domestic to attend upon her egress from the house.

By degrees Mr. Clarendon recovered from the

stupor of surprise and bewilderment into which he had been thrown by the closing scene of that strange interview; and he then began to reflect with an intense and absorbing interest on everything which had fallen from the lady's lips. He passed in review all the details of her remarks—he weighed her words with a minute carefulness—he considered all the possible bearings and every possible tendency which they might have. It was not difficult to perceive that she was well acquainted with his position; and she had also managed to probe the nature of his secret thoughts to no mean depth.

But who was she?—and what assistance could she possibly lend Mr. Clarendon in order *to raise him to that eminence to which his ambition aspired?* For in order to gratify that ambition, the coronet of a peer must be placed upon his brow: and who was this lady that could render him an aid so efficient as to reach so grand a consummation?

Unable to form even the remotest or wildest conjecture in this respect, Mr. Clarendon was relapsing into that bewilderment of the ideas from which he had just managed to emerge,—when the door opened, and the Hon. Mr. Eaton was announced.

Wonderful was the change which had recently taken place in this young gentleman. The ruddy glow of health was upon his cheeks: his eyes had lost all their wild and feverish brilliancy, and shone with a natural lustre;—his lips were of a wholesome red;—and his figure, though modelled in slight proportions, had lost its attenuation, debility, and appearance of caducity. Instead of the worn out and emaciated being he had so lately seemed, he was now a fine young man—remarkably handsome, and possessed of every personal attraction calculated to touch the female heart, as he was also endowed with every mental quality to enable him to win and retain it.

"Mr. Clarendon," said Arthur, when the usual complimentary greetings were exchanged, "I have paid my respects to you in the first instance this morning, because I am anxious to have a few moments' conversation with you before I join my fair cousins. The truth is," continued the Hon. Mr. Eaton, his countenance assuming a certain seriousness, though not of an expression which heralded any bad tidings,—"the truth is, I wish to put one candid question to you in the hope of receiving as frank a reply."

"Proceed, my dear Arthur," said Mr. Clarendon, somewhat amazed at the singularity of this prefatory observation. "I am convinced you cannot for an instant suppose that any frankness on your part will be met otherwise than with a congenial ingenuousness on mine."

"Oh! assuredly not, my dear sir!" exclaimed Eaton, whose voice of rich masculine melody constrasted strangely with the weak and enfeebled tones in which he had so recently been wont to speak, when labouring under the fatal effects of the slow poison, *alias* the Heir's Friend. "But you are well aware," he continued, "that when a person wishes to enter upon a delicate and confidential subject, he prefaces it with some precautionary remarks which are nevertheless in most instances unnecessary and uncalled for."

"And you are desirous of speaking to me on a delicate and confidential subject?" said Mr. Clarendon, wondering what on earth could be the topic thus mysteriously alluded to.

"Yes: are you surprised?" demanded Arthur, with a smile. "But not to keep you any longer in suspense, my dear Mr. Clarendon, I will at once frankly inform you that it is respecting your elder daughter, the charming Octavia——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, his countenance lighting up with a satisfaction which he could not conceal: for it instantaneously struck him that Arthur Eaton was about to demand Octavia's hand in marriage—and, with the rapidity of lightning, did his thoughts calculate all the advantages of such a connexion,—advantages, indeed, which would go far towards putting an end to that falseness of position in which Mr. Clarendon was situated with regard to the Marchmont family.

"In one word, then, my dear sir," resumed Arthur, after a moment's pause,—"do you believe that Miss Clarendon's affections are disengaged?"

"Certainly!—most assuredly!" exclaimed Mr. Clarendon, not for an instant deeming it possible that his daughter could be in love without his knowing it. "I acquainted you yesterday with the pleasing intelligence that Lord Florimel had on the previous day formally demanded my permission to pay his addresses to Pauline: but Octavia is as yet 'fancy free,' as Shakspere terms the virginity of the affections," added Mr. Clarendon, little suspecting how tremendously he erred in his belief and how completely he was deceived in that respect.

"You are certain that Octavia has formed no preference amongst the circle of her acquaintance?" said Arthur Eaton, inquiringly.

"I feel convinced that she has not," responded Mr. Clarendon, really believing what he was saying. "But wherefore have you asked me the same question *twice*?"

"Simply because I would guard myself against proceeding in error or misconception," answered the young gentleman. "There have been moments—especially lately—when it has struck me that Octavia was pensive—thoughtful——"

"I can assure you that I have noticed nothing of the kind," interrupted Mr. Clarendon, emphatically: "and, even if she do seem pre-occupied now and then, I will stake my existence it is not in consequence of any attachment secretly formed. Oh! no—she would conceal nothing from me——"

"As her father, you must decidedly know best," said Arthur. "Taking it for granted, then, that Miss Clarendon's affections are disengaged," he continued, in a tone of manly firmness, "I demand your permission to seek an interview with her for the purpose of offering her my hand."

"My dear Arthur," exclaimed Mr. Clarendon, his sallow countenance becoming radiant with joy, "I am delighted—nay, so overcome by this unlooked-for—this unexpected happiness—that I am at a loss for words to convey all I feel——"

"Then I have your permission," interrupted the young gentleman, pressing his relative's hands with cordial warmth: "and I shall hasten to avail myself of it!"

"Go, dear Arthur—go!" cried Mr. Clarendon, almost pushing him towards the door of the library: "you will find your cousins in the parlour—and Octavia will feel herself honoured and happy in the preference which you thus manifest in her favour,

where the fashionable world abounds in heiresses amongst whom you might select and choose at will."

But the latter portion of this sentence was lost upon Arthur Eaton, who, anxious to perform what he considered to be *a duty*, was already crossing the threshold of the library on his way to the parlour.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE SISTERS.

When breakfast was over on the morning of which we are writing,—and when Mr. Clarendon had left his daughters together, as already described at the commencement of the preceding chapter,—Pauline took her sister's hand and gazed so long and with a look so full of tenderness upon her countenance, that the latter suddenly felt assured either that something was amiss or that a revelation of importance was about to be made.

"My dearest Pauline," she exclaimed, "there is a peculiarity in your manner this morning——"

"Which alarms you, Octavia!" interrupted the younger sister, finishing the other's sentence for her. "But tranquillise yourself——"

"Ah! then you have some evil tidings to communicate, Pauline!" suddenly ejaculated Octavia, the colour disappearing from her cheeks. "Is it concerning yourself—or relative to me, my beloved sister? Speak—oh! speak quickly—and keep me not in suspense!"

"Hush!—not so loud!—we may be overheard," said Pauline, endeavouring to calm her sister's excitement: then, placing herself by Octavia's side, she murmured in a tremulous tone, and taking her hand, "It almost breaks my heart to have anything disagreeable to unfold to you——"

"My God! what do you mean?" demanded the elder Miss Clarendon, her anxiety and suspense now becoming utterly intolerable. "Oh! you are weeping, Pauline—you are weeping!" she exclaimed, throwing a look of wild excitement upon her sister: "the tears are raining down your cheeks—and it is for me that they fall! Tell me—tell me, dear Pauline—what has happened?"

"I conjure you to tranquillise yourself, Octavia," said Pauline, embracing her sister tenderly. "You know how devotedly I love you—how much I would undergo to save you a single pang——"

"And it is the same with me, Pauline," interrupted Octavia. "Feeling our motherless condition, we have ever loved each other with the fondest and most tender affection: and it is now by this affection—by this love, Pauline, that I conjure you to relieve me from suspense——"

"I will—I will," exclaimed the younger sister, whose cheeks were flushed with grief, as those of Octavia were pale with apprehension. "You believed that I went to the Opera last night: and it was not so."

"Then whither did you go?" inquired Octavia, amazement for an instant absorbing the intensity of her excitement: and she fixed her magnificent blue eyes upon Pauline's countenance.

"There was a grand entertainment at Carlton House last evening," began the younger Miss Clarendon; "and——"

"And you obtained an introduction thither?" exclaimed Octavia, a terrible tremor now coming over her, at the same time that an awful suspicion of the truth swept in upon her startled soul.

"Yes—I went to Carlton House," continued Pauline: "determined to clear up the dreadful mystery —— And, Oh! my beloved sister—my wronged, lost, betrayed Octavia——"

But, suffocated by her grief, Pauline stopped short; and, throwing herself upon her sister's neck, she wept convulsively.

"I understand it all——My God! I understand it all!" murmured Octavia, falling back upon the sofa, with her affectionate and kind-hearted sister clinging to her in the wildest paroxysm of grief.

A minute passed—and no sound fell from Octavia's lips: motionless likewise was she.

As the searing lightning darts vivid and sudden through the night of storm, and rain, and tempest—so, amidst the tumultuous anguish of Pauline's heart, did the blasting thought that Octavia was dead flash across her imagination.

Starting from the convulsive embrace in which she was holding her sister,—starting thence, we say, as if suddenly impelled away by an irresistible galvanic shock,—Pauline threw a terrified look on Octavia's countenance.

The unhappy young lady was not dead—nor even in a swoon: but she was stunned—stupified—paralysed by the weight of insufferable misery.

Spell-bound, as if under the incantation of some hellish spirit, was she!

And all in a moment she had passed through the most torturing phase of her existence—she had endured the crucifixion of that indescribable anguish which accompanies the sudden annihilation of the heart's fondest hopes—and she had as rapidly sunk into that species of stupor which is a palsy alike of the heart and of the brain!

Her eyes glared vacantly—her mouth was half-open—her bosom stood upheaved with the suspended breath.

"Octavia—my sister—my beloved sister!" exclaimed Pauline, wildly: "in the name of God, speak to me."

These words, uttered with all the passionate enthusiasm of the young maiden's fervent love and rending grief, seemed suddenly to break that spell which held Octavia in a waking, statue-like trance.

Deep sighs of returning breath broke from her, convulsing her bosom fearfully; and as the blood flowed back into the veins, the excruciating sense of bitter, bitter anguish returned to the heart. Then the eyes, like two arteries of the soul suddenly opening, poured forth their pearly torrents; and the pent-up agonies of Octavia's tremendous affliction found a vent affording that relief which ever follows tears, even in the midst of the direst woe that the human breast can possibly experience.

And Pauline suffered her to weep uninterruptedly for many minutes.

"I need not ask you to describe in words the terrible truth which my heart's worst fears have already made me comprehend, alas! too well," said the wretched Octavia, at length breaking the silence which prevailed: and, raising her tear-bedewed countenance towards Pauline's, she added, in a low and scarcely audible tone, "I should have been better prepared for this cruel blow!"

"Yes, my beloved sister," answered Pauline: "for

I know that you have recently experienced many sad misgivings and painful forebodings——"

"But it is so hard to abandon those delicious hopes which are indeed necessary to one's existence!" exclaimed Octavia, in a voice fraught with the terrible accents of despair.

"Remember, my dearest sister," said Pauline, her tone suddenly becoming hoarse, thick, and almost ferocious,—"remember," she repeated, more emphatically than at first, "that the Prince of Wales is now undeserving of your love. But if you should still feel that your heart clings to his image ——"

"My God! how can I ever efface that image from my soul?" exclaimed Octavia, now gazing in astonishment upon Pauline. "What, my dear sister—do you suppose that I can pluck forth this love of mine from my heart,—as if it were a flower which *his* faithless hand had placed in my bosom,—and trample it under foot? Oh! no—no: it were impossible! Look into the depths of your own soul, Pauline—consider well the nature of that affection which you bear for Gabriel—and then tell me whether it is something which you can break like glass, snap like a twig, or crush like a delicate rose-bud."

"No—no—it is not," murmured Pauline, her voice becoming soft and tremulous again; "and I was wrong—or rather foolish—to hope for an instant that you could so easily triumph over your heart's fondest affections. But, tell me, my dear sister—tell me how you mean to act——"

"Did you speak to—to—*him* last night?" inquired Octavia, in a stifling voice.

"Yes—and he offered to make any reparation which lay in his power," responded Pauline.

"What reparation can he make?" exclaimed Octavia, bitterly. "He found my heart a temple prepared for the holiest, sincerest, most impassioned worship which ever constituted the love that woman bears for man—and he has left that heart a ruin! Oh! my beloved sister, counsel—advise—instruct me: for I have no friend on earth in whom I can confide save thou!"

And, with tears again streaming from her eyes, Octavia threw herself upon the bosom of Pauline.

"I know not what course to recommend——My God! I am as much bewildered as yourself," exclaimed the latter, as she clasped her unhappy sister in an embrace which love and grief rendered convulsively passionate.

"But does he love me?—or has his affection subsided?" asked Octavia, slowly raising her head and looking intently upon Pauline's countenance. "Oh! you do not answer me—you avert your eyes—and your manner convinces me that even his very love is dead!"

"No—no, Octavia," exclaimed Pauline, emphatically,—"I do not mean you to understand *that!* But if his affection for you be ever so strong, you cannot enjoy it in honour to yourself! Ah! it was *this*—it was *this* that was uppermost in my mind when I averted my looks and dared not answer you. For listen to me attentively, my well-beloved sister," continued the young lady, wiping her eyes and summoning all her mental energies to her aid.

"Speak—speak," murmured Octavia. "I feel as if *you* were the elder sister—or as if you were a mother to me: for this cruel blow has sadly changed me within the last quarter of an hour! Speak, then, my dearest Pauline—and your words will console and strengthen me."

"In the first place, Octavia," said the younger Miss Clarendon, "it is absolutely necessary that you should exercise an immense control over your feelings. To this point you must tutor yourself at once—without delay. Our father may return to the room—visitors may be announced unexpectedly—and the strangest suspicions would be excited were we found sad, and weeping, and afflicted thus sorely. Courage, then—dear sister—courage!" exclaimed Pauline; "and nerve yourself to look this tremendous misfortune in the face—to contemplate it with as much calmness as you can call to your aid—to examine it in all its bearings—to study all its tendencies—and to arrive at some settled opinion how to act."

"Yes—yes: I will be calm—I will be tranquil," murmured Octavia, sobbing profoundly between the broken assurances which she thus gave her sister. "But, my God! the calamity is dreadful, Pauline—dear Pauline; and I know not whether it will end in suicide or madness!"

"O heavens! talk not thus wildly, my beloved Octavia!" exclaimed the younger Miss Clarendon, embracing her sister and lavishing upon her the most endearing caresses. "Come—let us converse seriously—quietly—calmly——"

"But have you anything to suggest?" demanded Octavia, hastily—a ray of hope flashing in upon her soul.

"Alas! I am myself almost bewildered," said Pauline. "And yet there are two alternatives for an injured woman to choose between in your case."

"Two alternatives!" exclaimed Octavia. "Oh! yes," she added bitterly:—"I have already mentioned them—madness or suicide!"

"Sister, you will distract me—you will render me unfit to counsel or console you!" cried Pauline. "In the name of God, Octavia," she exclaimed, throwing her arms round the unhappy young lady's neck, "do not talk thus—but fulfil your promise——"

"What promise did I make?" inquired Octavia, impatiently.

"That you would be calm and tranquil—that you would listen to me with attention," said Pauline, in the most endearing tone. "Were we not talking just now of the love which we bear for each other——"

"Yes, dearest Pauline—and I am wrong, very wrong to say anything to distress you," interrupted Octavia, returning her sister's caresses. "Now, Pauline, I am calm—indeed I am: I will listen to you with attention, my dear good sister. You were telling me that there are two alternatives for my contemplation. I can see none. My brain whirls—I am bewildered!"

And she laid her head upon Pauline's shoulder.

"Rest yourself there, my beloved sister," said the young lady; "and listen while I explain myself to you. Do not interrupt me—but hear me to the end: and I will speak slowly that you may follow me easily and readily as I proceed—for I can well understand, my poor Octavia, that this blow has fallen with tremendous weight upon your brain. I was saying, then, that there are two alternatives for you to contemplate. The first is to seek redress at the hands of the Prince of Wales—the second is to devour your grief in secret. You may ask me what

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reparation he can make you, otherwise than by leading you to the altar: I answer emphatically, that he can be forced to espouse you!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Octavia, starting up as if obedient to the sudden influence of a galvanic battery: then, clasping her hands together, she cried, "No—no, my beloved sister: you are deceiving yourself—you are deceiving me;—for did you not just now declare that, even if his affection were still mine, I could not enjoy it in honour to myself."

"Yes—I spoke thus—in haste—and without remembering at the instant that there was a possibility of adopting ulterior means," said Pauline. "Besides—I was anxious to probe all the varied feelings of your mind——"

"But you have spoken of ulterior means!" interrupted Octavia: "Oh! tell me—keep me not in suspense, dear sister—those means——And yet," she exclaimed, frantically interrupting herself and dashing her open palms wildly against her polished brow; "it were madness to entertain such a hope!"

"Not so foolish as you conceive, Octavia," answered Pauline, in a tone of partial triumph.

"A secret of the utmost importance is in my keeping—a secret which only became known to me on Sunday last, while I was out with Gabriel during your absence at church——"

"And that secret?" exclaimed Octavia, anxiously.

"Involves the honour of a lady of the highest rank——"

"But it will not save *my* honour, Pauline," interrupted the elder sister, bitterly. "Oh! what in the name of heaven has all this to do with my unhappy case?" she demanded, gazing in astonishment upon Pauline. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the lady who became a mother at our recent abode, under such mysterious circumstances——"

"Mrs. Mordaunt?" cried Octavia, literally trembling with impatience.

"Yes — Mrs. Mordaunt," repeated Pauline. "And can you guess who this Mrs. Mordaunt really is?"

"How can I, Pauline?" exclaimed the elder sister. "But you remember that we always suspected her to be some lady of rank—and her friend Mrs. Smith too——"

"Nor were we wrong in our conjectures, Octavia," proceeded the younger Miss Clarendon, solemnly: for—as sure as I am now addressing my words to you—that Mrs. Smith was the high-born, wealthy, and fashionable Countess of Desborough—and Mrs. Mordaunt was her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia!"

"Great heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Octavia, almost forgetting her own afflictions in the absorbing interest of this tremendous revelation.

"It is not only possible—it is the truth," said Pauline. "I have been introduced to her Royal Highness—and there is no doubt of her identity with our Mrs. Mordaunt. Besides," continued Pauline, "when in conversation with the Prince of Wales relative to yourself, I was anxious to ascertain whether *he* was acquainted with his sister's frailty—for at the moment I was breathing vague threats into his ear: and the few words which I let drop produced an effect upon him as if a vertigo had suddenly seized on his brain. Then—later in the evening—he asked me, in a tone full of deep meaning, whether Lord Florimel was acquainted with the Princess Sophia's adventure in the Edgeware Road——"

"Yes—yes—I recollect it well!" exclaimed Octavia, a sudden reminiscence flashing in upon her brain: "it was from my lips that the Prince of Wales learnt the dishonour of his own sister! He questioned me so closely—he forced me to reveal all that had occurred at the villa in connexion with the supposed Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith—and now I remember that there was something strange and unaccountable in his manner at the time!"

"Oh! was it not a species of retribution that he should thus have received the intelligence of his sister's shame from the lips of one whom he himself had dishonoured?" whispered Pauline, in a low and solemn tone. "But you now perceive, my beloved sister, how it is possible that this haughty Prince can be made to fall on his knees before you and consent to any sacrifice which you may dictate as the price of secrecy respecting the Princess?"

"My God! I dare not employ menaces, Pauline!" exclaimed Octavia, wringing her hands hysterically. "I have loved him too well—still love him too tenderly——And yet," she cried, suddenly interrupting herself, "why should I spare him, since he hesitates not to break my heart?—why should I release him from his vows, if it be indeed within my power to enforce their fulfilment?"

"It is a matter of such vital importance, Octavia," said Pauline, "that you must deliberate on it with far more composure and tranquillity than you can now bring to bear upon the question. Let us cease to speak thereon for the present—and, in the name of everything sacred! study to exercise a control over your feelings."

"I may say that the bitterness of death is past," observed poor Octavia, with difficulty subduing a profound sob. "The worst is now known—the most terrible paroxysm of grief is over—and I must endeavour——"

And scarcely had she time to wipe away the traces of her tears and smooth her charming auburn hair, when the door opened, and the Hon. Arthur Eaton made his appearance.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE PROPOSAL.

"My sweet cousins," exclaimed the young gentleman, observing that they both started and even exhibited signs of confusion and embarrassment, "if I interrupt you in any very serious discourse, I will at once retire. But really," he added, smiling, "I am at a loss to conceive what you can have to render you both so demure——"

"Nay—come in, Arthur," said Pauline. "You surely are not upon such ceremonial terms with us as to remain standing on the threshold until we invite you to enter."

"On the contrary, my dear cousin," returned Mr. Eaton, "I consider myself on so intimate and friendly a footing in this house, that I at once and unhesitatingly avow my desire to have a few minutes' conversation with your sister in private."

"With me!" ejaculated the elder Miss Clarendon, in amazement.

"Assuredly," answered the young gentleman, with a smile: "since Pauline has no other sister, I must of course mean you."

"And what can you possibly have to say to me in private, Arthur?" exclaimed Octavia, her colour coming and going in rapid alternations, as a thousand conflicting thoughts and fears swept through her mind.

"Nothing very formidable," was the response. "Now, my dear Pauline, I am certain you will gratify my request by leaving me *tête-a-tête* with your sister."

"Oh! certainly—since you are really serious—which I did not think you were at first," exclaimed Pauline: and, darting a look full of kind encouragement upon her sister, she hurried from the room.

"In the name of heaven! what means all this mystery, Arthur?" demanded Octavia, the moment the door closed behind Pauline.

"You are agitated—trembling from head to foot—apparently overwhelmed with some secret grief, Octavia!" exclaimed the young gentleman, heedless of her question—for he was suddenly struck by her excited manner, her changing cheeks, her rapid utterance, and her wild looks. "Tell me—has anything occurred to vex or annoy you?—for you surely can make a confidant of one who feels so deep an interest in your welfare as I."

"No—no—I am not agitated now," said Octavia, exerting all her power and all her strength to regain her self-possession. "I was only startled by the suddenness with which you demanded a private interview—I was fearful that something had happened—to my father perhaps——But I am composed and tranquil now, Arthur," she added, smiling faintly.

"I am afraid that you are only assuming a tranquillity which you do not in reality experience, Octavia," said the young gentleman, in a tone of deep and touching kindness. "However, I will not seek to penetrate into your feelings: perhaps the communication which I am about to make will induce you of your own accord to treat me with full confidence. Come, let us sit down, Octavia, and have five minutes' serious conversation together."

Thus speaking, he conducted her to the sofa: then taking a chair near her, he gazed upon her attentively for a few moments.

"To what is all this to lead?" demanded Oc-

tavia, experiencing a vague and unknown terror, and little divining the turn which the conversation was so speedily to take: but she felt, whilst she cast down her blushing face beneath the steadfast yet kind looks of her youthful relative, as if he were acquainted with her secret and was about to proclaim to her ears his knowledge of her amour, her dishonour, and her affliction.

"You ask to what all this is to lead, Octavia," said Arthur, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "as if my visit were an intrusion—as if my presence were unwelcome. Did I indeed interpret your words and manner in a sense so unaccountable on your part and so little flattering to myself, a seal would at once be placed upon my lips in respect to the communication which I am here to make."

"Pardon—forgive me, Arthur," exclaimed Miss Clarendon, extending her hand towards him: "I have been rude—unkind—eccentric——"

"Say no more upon the subject, Octavia," interrupted Arthur, pressing her fair hand for a moment, and then gently dropping it. "And now listen to me attentively, my fair cousin."

Octavia gazed upon him with more of curiosity and less of terror in her looks: for his words, tone, and manner were kind and reassuring in the extreme.

"You are well aware, my dear cousin," resumed Arthur, "that an unfortunate estrangement existed until lately between your branch of the family and mine. This breach—which, thank God! had nothing to do with either you or me—is now healed between our parents; and the two branches have become as it were one family. To speak, however, in a worldly sense,—and I cannot very well avoid touching upon the point, delicate though it be,—your father would naturally be pleased to behold *his* branch of the family sharing in the honours and enjoying the fortune of the race with which he is connected. Moreover, I have reflected, my dear cousin, that an atonement is due from the branch to which I belong unto yours: and duty, inclination, propriety, and justice have prompted me to take the step which I am about to explain to you."

He paused for a few moments, and fixed his eyes upon Octavia's countenance to ascertain if she had begun to comprehend his meaning: but so troubled did her brain still feel, after that long and terrible conversation with Pauline, that it was unable to exercise the keenness of perception and the readiness of conjecture which it would have called into play under other circumstances. Thus, bewildered by the prefatory observations which had just been addressed to her, the young lady returned the earnest looks of the Hon. Arthur Eaton with a vacant gaze of surprise, uncertainty, and suspense.

"You do not understand me, Octavia," he said, with a smile; "and I see that I must be more explicit. In a word, I have received from your father not only the assurance that your affections are disengaged, but likewise his permission to offer you my hand."

"Arthur—you—you—know not what you say—what you do!" murmured Miss Clarendon, suddenly thrown completely off her guard by a communication which so vividly and painfully recalled to her memory the love which she cherished for the ingrate Prince: then, darting upon him a look of ineffable anguish, she covered her face with her hands, and, bursting into tears, gave free issue to the pent-up grief which had been swelling for the last few minutes in her bosom.

"My God! Octavia, what ails you?—what is the matter?" inquired Arthur, amazed as well as painfully afflicted by this unaccountable and heart-rending behaviour of the young lady. "If I have said aught to offend you, Octavia, I implore your forgiveness. I sought to render you happy, and not bring tears from your eyes. But perhaps you love another, and your affection is a secret? Oh! cherish that love, then, Octavia, and think not for a single moment that I would seek to wean you away from the object of such an attachment."

"Spare me, Arthur—spare me!" murmured Miss Clarendon, her whole frame convulsing with an inexpressible grief. "Talk not to me of love——"

"Only one word more, Octavia," interrupted Arthur: "and *that* I must say, for my own sake—for yours also! Learn, then, that much as I esteem you—deeply as I am interested in your welfare—I do not love you otherwise than as a relative, or as a friend loves a very dear friend. It was not, then, through the heart's tender affection that I demanded your hand, but purely from a sense of duty. My reasons for believing that there *was* a duty involved in this step I have already explained to you; and you can now comprehend my motives——"

"Oh! yes, I perceive that you are the most generous of men!" exclaimed Octavia, all the nobleness of her cousin's intentions and views now bursting upon her mind as a flood of light streams suddenly into a dark cave, illuminating all its recesses. "You would have become my husband in order to make me the sharer of your rank and fortune; so that when Lord Marchmont should be summoned to the tomb, my father might be consoled for the loss of a coronet by beholding it upon the brow of his daughter! Yes, yes, Arthur Eaton, I comprehend it all now; and again I thank you—Oh! how cordially I thank you for this unparalleled generosity. But it may not be, Arthur," she added, her voice suddenly dropping, and her look bending downward at the same time, whilst a deep crimson glow suffused itself over her countenance, and her neck, even unto her bosom.

"You love another, then?" said the young man and, without waiting for a reply, he exclaimed, "God grant that you may be happy, Octavia?"

"Happy!" she repeated, with a sudden start: then, instantly composing herself, she said in a tone of deep and indescribable feeling, "I thank God, Arthur, that you do *not* love me: for had I an enemy deserving of my bitterest rancour, I would not wish that he should know what a hopeless attachment is."

"Ah!" ejaculated Eaton: "is it possible, my poor cousin, that your heart cherishes such a blighting love as this?"

"What have I said? what have I told you?" exclaimed Octavia, now perceiving that she had been hurried by her emotions to the vicinage of dangerous ground. "Do not question me any farther—do not persist in continuing the discourse upon this topic. I thank you, Arthur—most sincerely thank you—for the honour you have done me and the generosity which you have displayed towards my father and myself: but I beseech you not to press me for any additional

explanation respecting the motive which compels me to decline your flattering proposal."

"Not for worlds, Octavia," exclaimed the young man, "would I say or do aught to give you pain. But, ere we take leave of this topic altogether, permit me to make one observation, which I hope you will treasure up in your memory."

"Speak, Arthur," said Miss Clarendon, growing more composed.

"It is that should you ever be placed in a position to require a friend, Octavia—a sincere friend," repeated the Hon. Arthur Eaton,—"a friend in whom you might wish to put even more trust than in a brother,—hesitate not to send for me, and my actions shall prove the sincerity with which I am now uttering these words."

"Oh! the time may indeed come when I shall require such a friend as you," murmured Octavia, taking the young gentleman's hand and pressing it with all the cordial fervour of an intense gratitude. "Be assured I will not hesitate to address myself to you, Arthur, in such a case. But even now—at once—this moment," she exclaimed, a sudden thought striking her—"I am about to demand a favour at your hands."

"You have only to name it, Octavia," said Arthur, who, perceiving that the beauteous creature was unhappy, experienced a profound compassion and a sincere sympathy in her behalf. "In what manner can I prove my friendship to you, dear cousin?" he inquired, seeing that she hesitated.

"I have confessed to you that I love another," she responded at length, while casting down her looks and blushing deeply: "but I do not wish that my father should learn this secret."

"Not from my lips shall Mr. Clarendon receive the slightest hint of the real motive which has led you to reject my proposal," returned Arthur, emphatically. "I will seek him at once—I will tell him that you and I have had a long and serious conversation together, and that we have mutually arrived at the conclusion that our happiness would not be ensured by any closer alliance than that of friendship."

"I thank you sincerely, my dear cousin," said the young lady, "for this fresh proof of your goodness and generosity towards me."

Arthur Eaton then took his leave of Octavia, and returned to the library where Mr. Clarendon was building fine castles in the air on the strength of the belief which he entertained that his daughter would cheerfully accept her cousin's proposal.

"Well, my dear Arthur," he exclaimed, the moment the young gentleman re-appeared in his presence; "I suppose that nothing remains but to fix the day——"

"Indeed, my dear sir," interrupted Eaton, assuming a serious air, "nought is settled; nor is there ought now to settle."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Clarendon, in amazement.

"I mean that Miss Octavia and myself have had a long and solemn discourse together," answered the Hon. Mr. Eaton, "and that we have decided upon remaining excellent friends——"

"She has refused you, Arthur!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, his lips growing cold and quivering with rage.

"Not so, my dear sir," returned the young gentleman: "or rather, we have refused each other. But, if there be any preponderating fault on one side, it is upon mine, and you must not therefore blame your daughter."

Having thus spoken, Arthur Eaton took his leave of Mr. Clarendon, who was scarcely able to conceal his vexation and disappointment until the door closed behind the young gentleman: and then, throwing himself back in his seat, he clutched the hair on each side of his head, muttering savagely between his teeth, "Miserable wretch that I am! was I not born to experience an incessant series of misfortunes?"

But suddenly the image of the veiled lady sprang up in his mind: and, recovering his composure, he began to reflect profoundly once more upon all she had that morning said to him.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

THE HEIR-APPARENT AND HIS FRIEND.

WHILE these scenes were taking place at Mr. Clarendon's abode in Cavendish Square, his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales awoke with a bad headache and in an execrable humour, in his sumptuous bed-chamber at Carlton House.

We have already described this apartment in the sixteenth chapter of our narrative, to which the reader may refer if he be in any way anxious to refresh his memory concerning the luxurious manner of its fittings and appointments.

Raising himself painfully in his couch, and giving vent to a bitter imprecation against the aching pangs which racked his head, the Prince sought relief in the cooling beverages afforded him by the table at his bed-side; and when the draught of hock and soda-water had gone hissing down his parched throat, he threw himself back to enjoy the refreshing sensations which followed.

But though the pain in the head soon underwent a partial mitigation, the train of thoughts which gradually passed through the mind of the hair-apparent was of no pleasurable description.

Pauline had discovered his princely rank, and would of course communicate the circumstance to her sister. How Octavia would receive the terrible revelation,—whether she would be overwhelmed with grief or goaded to vengeance,—it was impossible to say. But certain it was that the secret of the Princess Sophia's frailty was in the keeping of those two young ladies; and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales shuddered when he thought what use they might make of their knowledge of his sister's shame.

Even if he had nothing more than all this to vex him, it was quite enough. But there were other circumstances which forced themselves on his contemplation, in spite of his habitual anxiety to shut his mental eyes against all unpleasant objects.

In the first place, he had not only signally failed in his stratagem with regard to the Countess of Desborough; but the incidents of the preceding evening had made her acquainted with a secret which so completely put him in her power that he would never again dare to spread the meshes of his intrigues at her feet. For she had learnt that Mrs. Fitzherbert was his own wedded wife; and that fact, breathed to the public, would endanger his accession to the throne, inasmuch as

the lady whom he had thus espoused, in spite of the Royal Marriage Act, was a Roman Catholic!

Secondly, his Royal Highness had no doubt provoked the bitter indignation of Mrs. Fitzherbert by his conduct towards Lady Desborough; and he not only dreaded "a scene" with his morganatic wife the next time he repaired into her presence, but he likewise trembled lest she should take it into her head to demand a full and complete recognition before the world, in order to escape in future the possibility of receiving such injurious imputations as Eleanor had in the first instance uttered against her during the memorable affair of the preceding evening.

All these matters were terribly perplexing to a Prince who hated even the trouble of thinking on anything save pleasure and enjoyment, and who was but little fitted by a life of sensuality and indulgence to grapple with a host of embarrassing circumstances. In fact, he could not bear to think for himself: and, knowing moreover that certain affairs had reached a crisis in which some resolute and definite step must be taken, he resolved to summon his universal friend to counsel and assist him.

Ringing the bell by means of the silken cord hanging between the curtains and the wall, he waited impatiently until the French valet, dressed with such nice precision in plain black, responded to the summons.

"Germain," said his Royal Highness, "send up immediately to Mr. Meagles' lodgings with a request that he will come to me as soon as possible."

The valet bowed and retired; and the Prince—fancying, with his natural indolence, that half of the necessary remedial measures were already accomplished in the mere fact of sending for the individual to whom their execution was to be entrusted—turned round and fell into a doze.

Then that high and mighty personage—the envied of all men,—the adored by all women,—the heir-apparent to the throne of England—snored as loudly, as coarsely, and as discordantly as any peasant: and moreover, this elegant and accomplished individual—this most polished gentleman in Europe—had gone to bed at two in the morning in the most beastly, helpless, and swinish state of intoxication!

O Royalty! how despicable wast thou then!

Well, George Prince of Wales enjoyed a comfortable snooze for nearly an hour, at the expiration of which time Mr. Meagles made his appearance; and his Royal Highness woke up.

"My dear Tim," he said, stretching forth his hand to grasp that of his friend, "come and sit down by the bed-side: for I am anxious to have a very serious conversation with you. Indeed, I have sundry revelations to make to you, and divers commissions wherewith to entrust you."

"I am at your service, Prince," answered Meagles, taking a chair: then, lolling back in the seat and caressing his well-curled auburn whiskers, he said, "Between you and me, my illustrious friend, you look just for all the world as if you had been infernally drunk last night. And yet that could scarcely have been the case, seeing that you gave a grand ball."

"By Jove! but it was the case though, my dear fellow!" exclaimed the Prince. "I was what may be called royally drunk; and what is worse still, I got drunk by myself, through sheer vexation and annoyance."

"The devil you did!" cried Meagles. "Let us hear how that happened."

"Yes—I must touch slightly upon it," said the Prince, in a musing tone: "because it has reference to the matters on which I am anxious to consult you. Well, you must know that at the early part of the evening Mrs. Fitzherbert took umbrage at something and left the ball-rooms. I sent after her to her own apartments, but she was nowhere to be found. However, it seems that she had retired to a spare bed-chamber not very far from the saloons; inasmuch as she suddenly made her appearance from behind the curtains in that chamber, when I and a lady who had been enticed thither by a well-contrived stratagem, were in the midst of a somewhat heated conversation together."

"What the deuce! did you meet the lady in the very same room to which Mrs. Fitzherbert had previously retired?" asked Meagles, to whom the explanation was not very clear.

"Just so," answered his Royal Highness. "And now, my good friend," continued the heir-apparent, with some little degree of hesitation and embarrassment, "I am about to reveal to you precisely the same secret which Mrs. Fitzherbert in her rage proclaimed to the astonished ears of the lady in question. But this secret, my dear Tim," added the Prince, emphatically, "is safe with the lady—for she is a woman of honour—and it must be safe with *you* also."

"Fear nothing, Prince," exclaimed Meagles. "You know well enough that I am not likely to betray any confidence which you place in me."

"Oh! I'm perfectly assured of *that*, Tim!" cried the Prince: then, sinking his voice to a low and solemn whisper, he said, "The secret which Mrs. Fitzherbert proclaimed last night and which I now reveal to you, is that we are married——"

"Married!" ejaculated Meagles, with well-affected astonishment; for he was already aware of the fact which the Prince of Wales was now confessing to him.

"Hush!" said the heir-apparent: "such a secret ought scarcely to be breathed to the air! Yes, it is true, Tim, that in a moment of weakness—folly—madness—I know not what to call it—I accompanied Mrs. Fitzherbert to the altar. Dazzled by her beauty—burning to possess her—excited almost to a delirium by the winning arts and seductive wiles which she practised to ensnare me,—I took that fatal step, believing it to be the only means of obtaining admission to her bed. However, the mischief is done, and cannot be undone: but you can well understand that it has placed me in a cruel dilemma, now that the King and the Ministers have determined to marry me to the German Princess."

"And in what manner can I assist you?" demanded Meagles, inwardly delighted to perceive that matters were now coming to a crisis in which his aid must inevitably be sought and full confidence reposed in him accordingly.

"I have been thinking seriously over my position," resumed the Prince; "and the only avenue of escape which I can discover out of a complete morass of difficulties is to assent to this marriage with Caroline of Brunswick. Steeped to my very eyes in debts—pestered by creditors whose dunning amounts to intolerable insolence—in constant danger of having my very carriage and horses seized by a rascally sheriff's-offi

every time I go out,—what course am I to adopt? I might bully my father in some respects, but I cannot bully the Ministers: and you know that Pitt and his party hate me as they do the very devil."

"Well, then, from all this I am to understand that your Royal Highness will marry the Princess Caroline of Brunswick?" said Meagles, interrogatively.

"Yes, provided I can in any way induce or compel Mrs. Fitzherbert to consent thereto," replied the Prince.

"By fair means I should think that you will never succeed," observed Meagles, drily.

"That is precisely the apprehension which I entertain," exclaimed the heir-apparent: then, after a brief pause, and in an embarrassed tone, he added, "And as to foul means, I know not what kind to adopt."

"But you *would* adopt them, if any were to be suggested?" said Meagles, in a quiet way.

"My position is so awkward—so embarrassing—so intolerable, Tim," answered the heir-apparent, in a subdued voice and with a significant look, "that I would do anything—yes, *anything*," he repeated, with marked emphasis, "to ameliorate it. In a word, if Mrs. Fitzherbert will not consent to this marriage which the King and Ministers have chalked out for me, I am a thoroughly lost, ruined, and degraded man."

"You would therefore bestow an immense reward upon any one who should,—either by fair means or by foul,—induce or compel Mrs. Fitzherbert to yield that consent and agree to any rational arrangement which you may be enabled to make with regard to herself? I should observe," added Meagles, "that you would undertake to grant such reward on your accession to the throne?"

"By heaven, I should only be too happy!" exclaimed the Prince. "But is it possible, Tim, that you have any plan in your head—any scheme——"

"Well, I can't exactly say at present," interrupted Meagles. "I may however think of a project——"

"Ah! I knew you would give me some hope in this respect!" cried the Prince, chuckling at the idea of getting rid of Mrs. Fitzherbert: for remorse or compunction seldom if ever stayed the progress of this bad man's execrable selfishness. "What is your plan, Tim?" he demanded, impatiently: "what do you suggest?"

"Leave me a little time to consider," responded Meagles, who did not choose to avow at once that he possessed the means of coercing Mrs. Fitzherbert at will. "Have you any other matters to communicate to me?—because you may just as well make a clean breast of all your difficulties and embarrassments while you are about it, and then I may be enabled to judge of the best measures to put you clear, right, and straight again."

"Well, I have something else to communicate," said the Prince. "The truth is, I have seduced a young lady——"

"The seduction of a young lady is the heading which must appear to many a chapter in your life, my dear Prince," interrupted Meagles. "But go on. You have seduced a young lady, and you are afraid of a row?"

"Precisely so," answered the heir-apparent.

"The fair one is a certain Miss Clarendon—Octavia Clarendon——"

"Daughter of a gentleman who is in some way connected with Lord Marchmont?" said Meagles, inquiringly.

"The same," replied his Royal Highness. "Do you know him?"

"Only by name," was the response. "But is the affair difficult to manage?"

"You perceive, Tim, that the young lady belongs to a highly respectable family——"

"To an aristocratic family," interrupted Meagles; "and, therefore, unless she be very proud of having been seduced by you—and unless her father and relations are also very proud that she should have become a Prince's mistress—this affair presents to our view a phase of no ordinary colour. For I am very certain that out of every hundred aristocratic families, ninety-nine would be charmed and delighted to see a wife, a sister, or a daughter publicly pointed out as the mistress of your Royal Highness."

"Such is no doubt the fact," observed George: "for the aristocracy, so haughty and overbearing to the middle and lower classes, is nauseatingly servile and cringing to Royalty. However, we will not waste time in discussing this point. Suffice it for our present purpose that Mr. Clarendon is a man who must be appeased for the dishonour of his daughter."

"Is he acquainted with the little circumstance?" inquired Tim.

"Not yet—at least I hope not. But there is no time to lose, my dear friend——"

"What do you wish to have done?" demanded Meagles.

"A peerage must be obtained for Mr. Clarendon!" was the emphatic response.

"The devil!" ejaculated Tim: "peerages are not picked up in the street; and I don't think that you could very well humble yourself so far to Pitt as to ask him for one."

"No, I would see the Prime Minister dead and damned first," answered the Prince. "It is of my father that the peerage must be demanded; and it is you who will undertake the mission on my behalf."

"Would you have me go to Windsor to wait upon his Majesty on such a business?" demanded Meagles, surveying the Prince with the most unfeigned astonishment.

"To be sure I would!" ejaculated his Royal Highness. "Surely you have the courage, Tim?"

"I have the courage to face the very devil himself," responded Meagles; "and that is more than enough to enable me to look the King in the countenance. But are you serious?"

"Never more so. You know that half of the Lightfoot certificate which I have in my possession?"

"To be sure I do," said Meagles, throwing off with an effort a sensation of uneasiness which suddenly began to creep over him at the mention of that fragment of the document: for the reader will remember that for some weeks past it had been in the possession of Tim himself, who found it amongst the roll of papers which he purloined from the desk on that morning when the heir-apparent amused himself with the Amazon in the bath.

"Well, Tim," continued the Prince of Wales

"you must take that fragment of the certificate with you, and my illustrious father will be very glad to give you in exchange an undertaking that the necessary patents shall be drawn up without delay, in order to confer the peerage on Mr. Clarendon. Come, Tim, you shall be off to Windsor this very day, for we may as well set briskly and earnestly to work with a view to have these little matters settled as soon as possible. Give me my desk, Tim, and I will at once put you in possession of the half of the certificate which is to act like a spell upon my father."

Putting a good face upon the matter, and with as much alacrity as if he knew that the document now required was really in the place where the Prince had deposited it, Tim Meagles proceeded to convey the handsome writing-desk from the cheffonier on which it stood to the table by the side of the sumptuous couch. His Royal Highness then drew the long gold chain from beneath his pillow; and with the key suspended thereto he opened the desk.

Plunging his hand amidst the papers which filled one of the compartments, the heir-apparent sought for the particular packet which he required; and when he could not immediately find it, he instituted a more careful and less hurried examination into the contents of that division of his desk. But, the packet still continuing invisible, he rapped out sundry impatient oaths: while a cloud gathered rapidly upon his brow.

"By heaven! I have lost the papers—the very important papers which I am seeking," he observed, in a tone of bitter vexation. "I am sure that I put them away here——"

"You might have locked them up in some other place," suggested Meagles, as if quite innocent of any sinister knowledge concerning them.

"No; I am sure they were *here!*" exclaimed the Prince. "Perdition! some one has been to my desk," he added, his entire countenance contracting with the rage and alarm that gathered rapidly in his breast.

"Have you lost any papers besides the half of the certificate?" demanded Meagles.

"Yes; several," responded the heir-apparent, clenching his fists with impotent fury: "papers of the utmost consequence—proving this very marriage between myself and Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"That is awkward—very awkward," observed Meagles, shaking his head in a serious manner.

"Awkward!—'tis positively ruinous," exclaimed the Prince. "What shall I do?—whom can I suspect? The only person at all likely to visit my desk would be Mrs. Fitzherbert herself——"

"Depend upon it, she is the authoress of this circumstance," interrupted Tim; "and if I were you, I would not annoy myself with unpleasant speculations and conjectures. Besides, if any other person should have got hold of those papers, it can only be for the purpose of selling them back again to you——"

"True!" ejaculated the Prince. "But what are we to do now without the fragment of the certificate in Hannah Lightfoot's affair?"

"Have the goodness to listen to me for a few minutes, Prince," said Meagles: "and I dare swear we shall come to a right understanding. You know that I am a man of rather ready wit, and that I don't take a year to decide what ought to be done when the emergency is so pressing as scarcely to leave a minute for reflection. Well, I have hit upon two schemes——"

"Two schemes?" exclaimed the Prince, inquiringly.

"Yes—two schemes," repeated Meagles: "for are there not two separate affairs to settle? One is to induce Mrs. Fitzherbert to consent to separate from you—to renounce all pretentions to be considered your wife—and to agree to such terms for her future maintenance as you may be enabled to propose. This, I say, is one object to gain—and I am the man to accomplish it!"

"You?" cried the Prince, with mingled amazement and pleasure. "But Mrs. Fitzherbert does not——"

And he stopped short suddenly.

"Does not like me much better than the devil does holy water, eh?" exclaimed Meagles. "*That* is what your Royal Highness would have said: and why not finish your sentence? It is useless to stand on ceremony with me. However, I tell you over again that I will undertake to induce the lady, whether she likes me or not, to assent to all the conditions I have named: but I must stipulate that you do not ask me to explain the means which I shall adopt for this purpose."

"Damn the means, Tim," exclaimed the Prince, in a hilarious tone, "provided the aim be accomplished. You have my free permission," continued this execrably selfish and diabolically heartless individual, "to use any spells, charms, incantations, or enchantments you choose,—in plain terms, to adopt any means you may think advisable, so long as the grand result be gained."

"Good!" observed Meagles, scarcely able however, to conceal his disgust at the cowardly, unmanly, demoniac treachery which that infamous Prince was capable of practising towards a woman who really loved him. "You may consider the affair relative to Mrs. Fitzherbert as being just the same as if it were settled. On my return from Windsor I will direct my immediate attention thereto."

"Your return from Windsor!" repeated the Prince: "but how can you go thither at all without the document?"

"I have a scheme in my head to meet *that* emergency also," replied Meagles. "Come, don't ask me any questions, and don't make yourself unhappy: *both* matters shall be settled, I can promise you. Mrs. Fitzherbert shall agree to your terms on the one hand, and your illustrious father shall grant Mr. Clarendon a peerage on the other hand."

"Is it possible, Tim!" exclaimed the delighted heir-apparent. "You are the cleverest fellow in the universe, by God! But how can I reward you for all this?"

"When I have fulfilled what I have promised, it will be time to talk of recompense," said Meagles. "No cure, no pay: but if there be a cure in this instance, I warn you, my dear Prince, that I shall ask something handsome as my reward, to be granted whenever the means are in your power."

"You cannot ask too much, my dear friend," said his Royal Highness, who was always ready to promise most lavishly at the very moment he was least able to perform.

"Well, well," said Meagles, in a tone of appa-

rent indifference; "we will talk about *that* another time. I am now off to Windsor."

Thus speaking, he shook hands with the Prince, and took his departure.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE NEW LIGHT TRACT DISTRIBUTION SOCIETY.

We must now inform our readers that when the message which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales sent up to Jermyn Street, requesting the immediate attendance of Mr. Meagles at Carlton House, was delivered to that gentleman, he was sitting at a late breakfast in company with his bosom friend the Amazon.

This beautiful, eccentric, and profligate woman was clad in her male garb, as usual; and the early scamper which she had taken on horseback, left upon her cheeks so ruddy a glow and so rich a bloom of health as to give her the appearance of all the virgin freshness of that youthfulness the plump charms and firm contours of which she had so well preserved.

At the moment when the message from the Prince of Wales was delivered in Jermyn Street, Tim Meagles and his lovely companion were enjoying a hearty laugh in anticipation of some capital fun which they had promised themselves that noon: for the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby had presented them with platform tickets for a grand meeting of the New Light Tract Distribution Society, which was to be holden at mid-day precise in a large hall somewhere in the Strand.

But the message from the Prince suddenly appeared to put an end to this project, until Meagles suggested that Lady Lade should divert herself by repairing to the meeting where he might join her the moment he had ascertained what his Royal Highness wanted with him.

This arrangement being accordingly settled, Meagles ordered his gig—drove the Amazon to the place of assembly—escorted her to a seat upon the platform—and then, taking a temporary leave of her, hastened to Carlton House, where he had that interview with the Prince which has been recorded in the preceding chapter.

The body of the hall was crowded to excess. Sanctimonious-looking gentlemen of middle age, pious elderly ladies, and demure old maids, were the principal specimens of animated nature: a great number of bald heads and white neckcloths were visible;—and, amongst the various odours which saluted the olfactory nerves, that of brandy decidedly prevailed over the eau-de-cologne, lavender-water, musk, and perspiration.

The platform was very well filled, but not inconveniently crowded; and its occupants were chiefly of the female sex, consisting of the wives, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, and daughters of the reverend gentlemen connected with the New Light Tract Distribution Society.

When the Amazon made her appearance, in her jaunty attire and with her riding-whip in her hand, those pious ladies elevated their eyes and their hands in an awful manner—while a subdued groan, as if of concentrated bitterness, passed through the assemblage: but smoothing her shining tresses, and stepping over the benches with her admirably symmetrical limbs, Lady Letitia wore a bland and affable expression of countenance as she proceeded to settle herself in a nook where she could hear and see all that was going on, but where she might to some extent escape a degree of observation which it was desirable to avoid even by one of her masculine character and bold disposition.

Scarcely had she thus taken a seat which suited her, when the organ began to play: but as the organist, who was of course a member of the Society, had been up all night at a "free-and-easy" and was now considerably disguised in liquor, he was not over particular as to the accuracy of the harmony which he thus sent forth to the audience. This little circumstance was not however noticed by the great majority of the assembly; and as for the tipsiness of the individual himself, *that* is a little secret which was not even suspected, but which we have ventured to record for the behoof of our two hundred thousand readers.

The organ had been playing for about five minutes, when a small low door opened at the back of the platform; and thence came forth six or seven demure, sanctimonious, and mournful-looking gentlemen, amongst whom were the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax.

A tremendous clapping of the hands and stamping of the feet instantly commenced throughout the hall: the organ ceased—and when the applause had finished also, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax vociferated at the top of his voice, "Christian friends, I beg to move that Brother Sneaksby do take the chair!"

The motion, being seconded, was duly carried; and the reverend gentleman took his seat in the presidential chair with as awful a ceremony and as miserable an expression of countenance as if it were the rack or some other frightful engine of torture. For be it remembered that the "saints" always look as wretched and unhappy as possible—just for all the world as if it were a sin to be cheerful, merry, and contented.

Renewed applause accompanied the taking of the chair; and when the clapping of hands and stamping of feet had again subsided, the secretary, who delighted in the euphonious name of Gotobed Tumpkins, gave out a hymn.

Then the whole audience, alike in the body of the hall and on the platform, rose up, the organ pealed forth the wrong tune, and a thousand voices combined their nasal twangings in such harmony that would have driven Saint Cecilia crazy had she been alive and present to hear it.

The hymn, which by the bye was of the Secretary's own composing, having been brought to a conclusion—not, however, without some danger of cracking the Amazon's ears, unaccustomed as she was to such peculiar melody,—the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby rose and addressed the meeting at great length.

He said that this was the second anniversary of the New Light Tract Distribution Society, and that he was overpowered with feelings of holy ecstacy on finding that such a numerous, respectable, and godly assemblage had met to celebrate the occasion. The Secretary would presently read his Report, from which interesting document it would appear that several lost sheep had been redeemed from the darkness in which they had long been floundering, and were now amongst the most savoury vessels of the Lord.

(*Loud cheers*) But it must not be forgotten that there were still thousands (*groans*),—he might say hundreds of thousands (*deep groans*),—nay, millions (*hollow groans*),—yes, millions of benighted beings whose redemption it was most desirable to work out. (*Hear, hear.*) But how was such redemption to be effected? Mainly by the aid of that Society, whose Tracts could be insinuated into families whither the missionaries of the New Lights could not themselves obtain access. Would that meeting, then, support the Society? (*Cheers*) Ah! it was all very well to cheer and applaud: but would those pious, holy, and godly persons whom he (Mr. Sneaksby) was addressing,—would they, he wished to know, put their hands into their pockets? (*Cheers.*) And if they put their hands into their pockets, would they pull them out again with something in them? (*Loud cries of "We will! we will!"*) This was an enthusiasm which he (Mr. Sneaksby) was delighted to behold, and which he fully and completely shared; and he begged to observe that all subscriptions made that day to the funds of the Society would be advertised in the leading newspapers, with the names and addresses of the donors in full. (*Tremendous applause.*) Mr. Sneaksby then delivered a long and eloquent harangue, in which he proved to the satisfaction of all present, the Amazon alone excepted, that heaven was intended exclusively for the New Lights, and that the members of all other sects, creeds, and religious denominations were as assuredly booked for the lower regions as he (Mr. Sneaksby) was there to proclaim the fact.

The reverend gentleman sate down amidst tremendous cheering, which was prolonged for some minutes,—during which the elderly ladies had recourse to their brandy-flasks, whereby they seemed considerably refreshed.

Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins, the Secretary, then rose to read the Report; and, as he had the misfortune to have a crooked leg, he walked with a peculiarly

comical up-and-down motion from his seat to the front of the platform. His presence nevertheless elicited immense applause, which he acknowledged with sundry low bows addressed to all quarters of the assembly.

The Report set forth that during the year ending on that day the Society had enjoyed an increased amount of divine grace, the income being 300*l.* more than that of the previous year. (*Cheers.*) During the last twelve months the receipts had amounted to 7,567*l.* 3*s.* 2½*d.*; and the expenditure to 7,567*l.* 3*s.* 2*d.* Balance in the Treasurer's hand, one halfpenny. (*Cheers.*) The salaries of Directors, Managers, Secretary, Auditors, Treasurer, and Clerk, amounted to 6,000*l.*: Rent of Offices, Stationery, and Extras, 500*l.*; Law Expenses, 500*l.* There then remained the handsome sum of 567*l.* 3*s.* 2*d.* to expend in the distribution of Tracts; and he (Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins) could congratulate the members of the Society upon having a balance in hand. It was true that this balance was not considerable—indeed it was only one halfpenny; still it was a balance—and he would defy their enemies to accuse them of being in debt. (*Loud cheers.*)

When the applause had subsided, a stout consequential-looking little man rose up in the midst of the assembly, and desired to know how law expenses to the amount of 500*l.* had been incurred. Mr. Sneaksby, as chairman, desired him not to interrupt the proceedings; but the little gentleman grew excited, and insisted on having an answer—alleging that he was a subscriber of 5*l.* a-year to the Society and had a right to know how the money was expended.

The Secretary, Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins, thereupon explained that an action had been brought against that holy and pious vessel, the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, for the seduction of a small tradesman's wife; that the Committee of the Society, well convinced of their excellent pastor's innocence, made the cause their own and employed the Society's solicitor to manage the defence; that, when the case was tried, the Judge and Jury were evidently leagued together to oppress the guiltless Mr. Sneaksby; that a verdict was accordingly given against him; and that the Society had to pay the damages and costs in order to save the reverend gentleman from a prison. (*Groans.*) But Mr. Sneaksby was there—in the presence of his friends; and he (Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins) would ask whether he (the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby) looked like a guilty man or not.

"Innocent! innocent!" ejaculated innumerable voices: while the object of this sympathy pursed up his mouth in so extraordinary a fashion that he certainly bore at the moment a greater resemblance to a humbug than a saint.

"I protest against adopting the Report with that item of 500*l.* for law expenses," exclaimed the short, fat, consequential-looking man, casting fierce glances around. "I call upon this meeting——"

"Order! order!" cried several voices.

"Chair! chair!" vociferated others.

"I call upon this meeting, I say," roared the little gentleman, becoming very red in the face, "to take notice that a jury of his countrymen has pronounced Nathaniel Sneaksby guilty of seducing a married woman——"

"Chair!"—"Order!"—"Chair!"—"Turn him out!" were the cries that now rose in quick succession from all parts of the meeting.

"Yes—turn him out!" bawled Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins from the platform:—and the stout gentleman was accordingly bundled from the hall, and thrust neck-and-crop into the street, with his coat slit up the back, his shirt-frill torn to shreds, and his hat as flat as a pancake.

This little affair being settled, to the indescribable relief of the Reverend Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, the Secretary was about to resume his Report; when another member in the body of the hall stood up to make a few remarks. Undeterred by the example of the stout, consequential-looking gentleman, this individual began to expatiate in an excited manner upon the monstrous extravagance evidenced in the administration of the Society;—and he was in the midst of a comparison of the sum absorbed in salaries with that which remained to carry out the objects of the association, when the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby rose from his chair, exclaiming, "Dear Christian friends, I put it to you whether this most indecent—this most indelicate—this most unheard-of interruption ought to continue?"

"No—no!"—"Order!"—"Chair!"—"Turn him out!" arose from every direction; and, in the twinkling of an eye, the Opposition-member was thrust violently towards the door—kicked ferociously down the steps—and bundled ignominiously out into the street, in as miserable a plight as his predecessor.

This second episode, which afforded uncommon delight to the Amazon, being terminated in so summary a manner, Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins was at length permitted to continue the reading of his Report, which proceeded to set forth several examples and instances of the beneficial results achieved by the Society.

We quote a few of the specimens thus adduced.

"*Case the First.*—Jonathan Crick is a tailor by trade: age forty-seven. When a little turned of thirty, married a woman who proved to be much given to drink. Yielding to the effects of evil example, Jonathan Crick became a drunkard likewise. Neither he nor his wife ever went to church or chapel, and never saw a religious Tract. His business went to ruin; and he passed through the Insolvents' Court. Attributes his misfortunes to the want of religious Tracts. On coming out of prison, got a friend to be answerable for the rent of a small shop and to lend him a few pounds to stock it. But Mrs. Crick made away with everything she could lay her hand on in order to obtain drink. One day—nearly two years ago—one of the New Light's Tracts was left at Crick's shop. This was Tract 127, headed *The Fiery Furnace.* Mrs. Crick was sitting drunk by the fire when the Tract was placed in her hands. She dropped it upon the grate: it caught a-light—she tried to save it—and the flames were communicated to her dress. Before assistance could come, she was burnt to death. This circumstance produced a great effect upon Mr. Crick's mind; and being totally destitute of the wherewith even to buy bread, he resolved to abstain from strong drink. In due time a pious widow, belonging to the New Lights visited the unhappy man with a bundle of the Society's Tracts. Crick knew her to be possessed of a competency; and he naturally felt interested in her. They sate down together and read Tract 613, headed *Balaam's Ass.* Greatly refreshed, Mr. Crick besought the pious widow to kneel down and pray with him. This she did; and every day

for six months she visited him. On each occasion Mr. Crick prayed devoutly in her presence. The good woman grew attached to the brand which she had plucked from the burning; and at the expiration of the six months she became his wife. Five months after their marriage they were blessed with a full-grown baby, which must be considered a signal mark of divine love for this good couple. Mr. Crick is now an influential, staunch, and regularly paying member of this Society, of the beneficial effects of which he is a striking example: for it was through Tract 127 that he lost a bad wife who drank away all his substance, and through Tract 513 that he obtained a good wife who brought him 200*l.* a-year. *Balaam's Ass*, glazed and framed, hangs over his mantel-piece.

"*Case the Second.*—Anthony Sawkins was until recently a tinker: age fifty-three. Had always been particularly fond of smoking. Used to be much addicted to lying in bed and smoking his pipe at the same time. His wife is a bustling, active, economical body, who has brought up a large family respectably, in spite of her husband's indolent habits, of which she vainly endeavoured to break him for many years. When lying in bed, Sawkins was wont to be perpetually bawling after her to come and bring him a light for his pipe. To save trouble she kept a constant supply of Difkin's Patent Self-acting Lights. About eighteen months ago the box containing these matches got damp, and they would not act. This caused Sawkins to be very violent one morning, because he was kept waiting for his favourite pipe. The wretched man abused his wife in the most ungodly style, calling her after the Woman of Babylon. At that moment Tract No. 1, entitled *The New Light*, was left at the house. '*There!*' exclaimed the excellent and pious Mrs. Sawkins, rolling up the paper into a pellet and flinging it at her husband; '*if the old lights won't do, try this New Light!*' The man read the Tract—got up and dressed himself—came to the Society's Office—and inquired whether the Committee wanted a bustling, active man to distribute its publications. Was at once taken into the Society's employment at a salary of twenty-five shillings a-week. Has proved very regular in his attendance, and is a staunch New Light. Says that he never earned more than ten shillings a-week as a tinker; and has every reason to bless the Tract Distribution Society.

"*Case the Third.*—James Clubber is a boy, aged fifteen. Never knew who his parents were: never went to school. Was a beggar in the streets until about a year ago. At that period he was passing by the Office of the Society, just as the printer was delivering in a hundred thousand copies of Tract No. 17, entitled *The Poor Boy's Friend*. By some accident, half a ton of the printed paper fell out of the cart upon James Clubber. He was taken up insensible, and carried into the Office. On being restored to life, he said that he was hungry; whereupon a good meal was given to him, and he speedily recovered altogether. Your Committee, perceiving something intelligent in the boy's countenance, determined to take him into the Society's employment. They did so; and he thankfully accepted the offer. When well dressed, well fed, well paid, and well treated altogether, James Clubber acknowledged that he was entirely indebted to Tract 17 for this signal change in his fortunes.

"*Case the Fourth.*—Elizabeth Jenkins was for many years housekeeper to an old gentleman: her age is now fifty-six. She was wont to be giddy, fond of dress, coquettish, and never went to church: neither did she ever read any religious works whatsoever. Now looks back with horror on her benighted condition and feels that it was entirely owing to the Society that she was ever brought to a state of soul-savouriness. For about fifteen months ago her master got hold of Tract 128, headed *The Deceitfulness of Riches*. He made her sit down and read it to him; and such was the effect produced upon his mind that he became convinced that riches were a curse to their possessor. Elizabeth Jenkins was suddenly inspired with the same holy belief; and she prayed and besought the old gentleman to turn all his property into gold—put the greater portion into a bag—and let her go and throw it into the Thames, so that the odious temptations of wealth might be triumphed over at once and for ever. The worthy man, whom our enemies declare to have been in his dotage at the time, complied with this pious suggestion: and Elizabeth Jenkins took away the bag in the middle of the night. Soon afterwards the old gentleman died, and was buried at the expense of the parish. Elizabeth Jenkins is now comfortably off, and thankfully ascribes her present happy position to that admirable Tract on *the Deceitfulness of Riches*.

"*Case the Fifth.*—Susan Bridewell, aged 23, belonged to the class of females termed 'unfortunate.' Was seduced by a Bishop when only fourteen. Lived with a Member of Parliament until she was eighteen; and being a girl of good education, helped him to frame a Bill for the Prevention of Immorality. The death of that gentleman in a fit of intoxication, threw Susan Bridewell upon the town. For four years she led a life of profligacy awful to contemplate; and, as she now declares, often has she cried and wept bitterly, when under the influence of strong waters, to enter into a state of grace. One night, about eleven months ago, she fell down in a hopeless condition of intoxication at the door of a house of ill-fame, in which she lodged. Fortunately for herself—fortunately for this Society—fortunately for the cause of morality, the revered and pious Nathaniel Sneaksby was passing at the moment. He raised her in his arms—he bore her up to her chamber—he laid her upon the bed—and, kneeling down, he prayed all night by her side. When she awoke in the morning, he exhorted her to turn away from her awful career and think of her salvation: and it will show you in what a benighted state this unhappy creature was, when we record the lamentable circumstance that she accused our respected brother, Mr. Sneaksby of a desire to take his departure without paying her for the alleged sale of her beauty. Vainly did he protest that he had found her drunk and incapable—that he had treated her as a Christian sister—and that he had sorrowed and prayed throughout the night on her behalf. His words were received with ribald laughter—his assurances with obscene jests; and all the Scarlet Women of Babylon dwelling in that house—yes, each one—did congregate and upbraid our brother Sneaksby with terrible revilings. He was therefore compelled to empty his purse for the behoof of those lost and unclean vessels; and he departed rather in sorrow than in anger. On his arrival at the Office of the Society, he selected Tract 307, headed *Come into my arms, O Sinner!* and sent it to Susan Bridewell. An hour

afterwards she arrived in a hackney-coach, and had a long interview with Brother Sneaksby. Alone were they together for several hours; and those hours, Brother Sneaksby assures us, were passed in strenuous endeavours to bring her to a state of grace. He was successful; and the Committee, at once acceding to our reverend pastor's recommendations, took a respectable and comfortable lodging for the poor young woman. Brother Sneaksby continued to visit her frequently, remaining long with her each time, and regaling her with the most refreshing discourse. She told him her history; and he, with that laudable anxiety which ever animates him to forward the interests of the Society, proceeded at once to the Bishop who had originally seduced her, and menaced that wicked prelate with exposure. To avoid such a catastrophe, the Bishop gave a cheque upon his banker for a thousand guineas, whereof one-half was duly paid to the young woman and the other half into the treasury of the Society. Susan Bridewell is now living in comfort, happiness, and the practice of all Christian virtues; and she never thinks of the Tract headed *Come unto my Arms*, without feeling a deep sense of gratitude towards the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby."

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the tremendous enthusiasm with which these examples were received. Every one present, the Amazon alone excepted, appeared completely satisfied with such proofs of the beneficial influence and salutary tendency of the New Light Tract Distribution Society; and the last case, especially, enhanced almost into a worship the admiration already experienced towards the Reverend Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby.

Silence having been restored, it was moved, seconded, and carried that the Report be adopted; and the chairman then announced that "their very excellent, staunch, and well-tried friend, Mr. Blarney Gloze, would address the meeting."

"Christian friends," said the gentleman thus introduced, and who was a thin, dapper-looking, consequential personage,—"you will believe me when I declare that this Chewsday is the most se-uperlatively happy one I ever passed in all my life. It will pre-uve delightful ne-use for me to send to our Christian friends in the country,—ne-use informing them that this blessed jeu-bilee has placed the Ne-u Lights in so enjeuring a position. For do we not feel like men who, having fought a jewel against infidelity, have come off with no jubious victory—but with a certain triumph? The case of that poor ge-irl, S-eusan Bridewell, hath deeply touched my beu-sim; and I beg to propose a ve-ote of thanks and gratiteude to our dear friend whose ke-ounsel pre-uved so saleutary in her behalf."

"Christian friends," vociferated a stout, vulgar-looking, dogmatical man, suddenly springing up from his seat on the platform,—"I beg leave to second that motion. I conceive it a dooty we owe to our cheerman to testify our gratitood towards him. He has pursood a virtoous career; and every attriboot combines to render him sootable to the high post he okkipies amung us. A wote of thanks is his doo. Our friend Mr. Gloze has rightly said that this is a Toosday sooperlatively happy; and I agree with him that such a joobilee will constitoot glorious noose to send our brothren in the country. Like Mr. Gloze, too, do I look on this Toosday's proceedings as calquilated to place the Noo Lights in an eudooring position: and, in the same way as our friend has so bootifully expressed his-self, do I feel like a man who has fout a dooel against infidelity, and come off with no dooblous victory. As for that poor guri, Soosan Bridewell, I knee her when fust Brother Sneaksby brought her to a state of grace; and my boo-zim melts when I think of all she has endoored. Christian friends, I beg to conclood by seconding the motion of thanks to the cheerman."

Both these speeches which we have recorded, were received with rapturous applause; and the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby rose to deliver an oration in acknowledgment of the honour which had been done him.

But scarcely had the first nasal twang of his elocutionary style begun to vibrate through the air, when the Amazon felt a hand suddenly placed upon her shoulder.

She started—looked up—and beheld Tim Meagles behind her.

"Come, my beauty," he whispered, bending down his head towards her ear: "you must follow me away from this humbugging scene at once. There is better sport for us in view."

The beautiful huntress accordingly rose from her seat and accompanied Tim Meagles from the hall.

On reaching the street, he handed her into his gig: then, taking his own seat in the vehicle, he drove at a rapid rate towards Jermyn Street.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE EXPEDITION.

DURING the drive to his lodgings, Tim Meagles explained in a few hasty words that he was compelled to repair forthwith to Windsor Castle, upon very pressing business in behalf of the Prince of Wales; and he invited the Amazon to accompany him.

"The truth is, my beauty," he said, with a merry laugh, "I am going to pay my respects to his Majesty King George the Third: and as you and I are now rowing in the same boat with regard to certain little plans and intrigues of our own, I think it will be as well for you to go with me."

"Are you in earnest, Tim?" demanded the Amazon, with a smile which displayed her brilliant teeth between the moist red lips.

"Never more so in my life, Letitia," responded Meagles. "The moment we get to Jermyn Street, you will send for your horse—and you can also forward at the same time a note to Sir John, telling him that you will not be home until to-morrow afternoon or evening. You can do *this* — can't you?"

"Most assuredly," answered the huntress. "But is it your intention that I should merely accompany you to Windsor——"

"Not only to Windsor, my charmer," interrupted Meagles,—"but likewise into the very presence of George the Third himself."

"Then I must take a change of garments with me," observed Lady Lade: "and in order to select an appropriate attire, it is absolutely necessary that I should go home first——"

"No such thing!" exclaimed Meagles. "We will have some fun with the old King, depend upon it—and therefore you shall appear before him in your Amazonian garb. The instant he knows what

ear business is, he will be civil enough, I can promise you. But here we are."

And as Meagles thus spoke, the gig stopped at Mrs. Piggleberry's house in Jermyn Street.

The instant that Tim and his fair companion got up-stairs, the requisite orders were issued for their journey; and a hasty note, which the Amazon penned to her husband, was despatched by Wasp to the baronet's house in King Street,—the page likewise receiving instructions to bring round her ladyship's favourite steed.

It was about half-past two o'clock when the preparations for departure were accomplished: and now behold Tim Meagles mounted on a spirited horse, which however knew its master's hand by the way in which he held the reins,—the Amazon bestriding a beautiful animal, whose curvettings at starting enabled her to display her unequalled skill in the equestrian art,—and Master Wasp seated on the prettiest pony that ever attracted notice with its exquisite shape and its graceful action.

Such was the cavalcade which now moved away from Jermyn Street, and proceeded gently over the stones until the good hard road was gained; and then the steeds broke into a smart trot.

Nothing could exceed the picturesque elegance of Lady Letitia's appearance as she sate, like a modern Diana the Huntress, upon that beautiful animal which she managed with such skill and which seemed proud to bear so lovely and interesting a burthen.

The fine, sharp, frosty air brought the richest carnation hues to the Amazon's cheeks: her eyes—those superb dark eyes—shone with the excitement of a kindred glow;—her luxuriant hair, glossy and silken, streamed in a myriad ringlets from beneath the broad-brimmed hat which she wore so jauntily and which gave a certain archness of expression to her handsome features.

And how faultless was her carriage—how full of winning grace and statuesque elegance was her attitude on horseback! The harmony of all the undulating lines which traced the fine contours, the rounded limbs, and the voluptuous reliefs of her symmetrical form,—the suppleness of which her organs were capable, the lightness of her movements, and the flexibility which distinguished her muscular powers,—and the superb swell of the bosom that seemed ready to burst through the tightly-fitting coat which served as an external indication of the luxuriance and firmness of that bust,—all these were set off to their utmost advantage by the feminine gracefulness mingled with the masculine skill and boldness which characterised her appearance as an equestrian.

Ten thousand times more attractive was she in her male attire than when dressed in the garb which properly belonged to her sex. For whereas the latter concealed all that fine sweeping length of limb which the Amazon possessed in such perfection,—so, on the other hand, did the tight breeches and the elegant boots develope and set off, rather than conceal, those robust but symmetrical proportions which we have just eulogised. In the same way did the close-fitting frock exhibit the great expansion of the hips—the waist that seemed so wasp-like in its slenderness when compared with the fulness of the contiguous parts—and that exuberant bust which a very critical judgment would have pronounced too large to satisfy a pure and delicate taste for beauty.

But a splendid creature was she, certainly—and well might Tim Meagles be proud of the companionship of that goddess-like horsewoman.

Her fine large dark eyes sparkled with vivacity and spirit: the smiles that wreathed her rich red lips were full of cheerfulness;—and the glowing colour which was heightened by exertion, resembled the brightest bloom of the carnation, dying off into ivory fairness.

To gaze upon her for a few moments, was sufficient to convince the beholder that to a gay and joyous nature she united a warm and voluptuous temperament,—and that boldly and fearlessly as she could dash along over gate and fence, and barrier and ditch, in the ardour of the chase, so meltingly and tenderly could she dissolve into amorous softness and yield herself up to the delicious abandonment of wanton dalliance.

Having trotted—then cantered—and then galloped along the road for some distance, the party reined in their steeds to a walk; and Meagles now related in full all the particulars of his interview with the Prince of Wales.

"Well," exclaimed the Amazon, laughing heartily, "this is about as amusing an adventure as I was ever led into, or as you and I were ever bent upon together. Here we are,—you in your riding-dress, and I in my huntress-garb,—on our way to Windsor Castle to demand an audience of the King;—and the object of that audience is the modest request of a peerage for some gentleman whose name is probably unknown to his Majesty's ears."

"I admit that the adventure is singular and the object is somewhat bold," said Meagles, echoing his fair companion's merry laugh: "but depend upon it, my beauty, that we will succeed. I have got the document—the precious document—in my pocket," he added, his tone suddenly becoming more serious: "and if his Majesty be proof against *that*—why then I shall be most wonderfully mistaken."

"But for what reason on earth have you resolved to drag me into the royal presence?" inquired Lady Letitia.

"In the first place, my charmer," answered Tim, "because you and I are partners in certain schemes and plans——"

"But do you fancy, my dear fellow," interrupted the huntress, reproachfully, "that I cannot trust you to manage things by yourself? I would not wrong you to such an extent, Tim," she added, hastily: "for you know that I entertain an affection for you—and I believe that I am not altogether indifferent to you."

"You may well say that, Letitia!" ejaculated Meagles, although at the same instant the image of Rose Foster sprang up in his mind and caused him to heave a sigh. "But, as I was observing," he hurriedly continued, "I thought it right, in the first place, that you should come with me; and secondly, I wanted a cheerful companion. If you object to my first motive, you will at least give me credit for the latter."

"Ah! you are a good-for-nothing fellow, Tim," exclaimed the huntress, slashing him across the shoulders in a playful manner with her riding-whip. "And so I suppose we shall pass the night at Windsor—eh?" she observed, glancing archly towards him.

"As a matter of course—because we cannot hope to see his Majesty before to-morrow morning, al-

though we will endeavour to obtain an interview this evening," said Meagles. "But remember, my beauty, you will pass as Mrs. Meagles at the hotel at Windsor—and now you comprehend what *that* means."

"We shall see all about it presently, Tim," responded Lady Letitia, laughing. "I suppose that Wasp will tell no tales on our return to London."

"If Wasp were inclined to gossiping, he might have told enough concerning us long ago," said Meagles. "But neither he nor the excellent Mrs. Piggleberry ever seem to take the slightest notice when you pass the night with me at my lodgings."

"Hold your tongue, Tim!" exclaimed the Amazon. "It is positively shocking to talk in such a way in the broad daylight," she added, her merry laugh again ringing musically through the crisp sharp air. "And now tell me, Mr. Scape-grace, why you have undertaken that crusade against poor Mrs. Fitzherbert, whom the unprincipled George is thus resolved to persecute?"

"Mrs. Fitzherbert has always hated me as sincerely as the devil does holy water," answered Meagles; "and at times she has been most repulsively rude and insufferably insolent towards me. Now you know, my charmer, that I have never merited such treatment at her hands: for I have frequently rendered her little services which she ought not to forget. More than once have I taken her jewellery to the pawnbroker's for her when she was short of cash and the Prince had none to give her; and I have even given my own security and lent my own money to silence her most clamorous creditors. But I do not recollect that I have ever received from her lips a single word of thanks. She has treated me as if I were a lackeypsy—a lickspittle—a slave—a servile wretch who was only fitted to be employed in the vilest offices, and who was too well rewarded by the mere fact of being allowed to perform such services for Royalty. Now, my dear Letitia, could I do otherwise than smart under such behaviour as this?"

"I admit that the provocation is great, Tim," said the Amazon; "but you are too good-hearted a fellow to cherish vindictive feelings—especially against a poor weak woman, who will shortly find her own husband—for such indeed the Prince is—becoming her greatest enemy."

"Were it a mere question of vengeance, my darling huntress," responded Meagles, "I should scorn—despise the idea. Vengeance against a woman is beneath a man. But the conduct which I propose to pursue in respect to Mrs. Fitzherbert, essentially regards the particular schemes that you and I have formed. Therefore, as it suits my interests—or rather *our* interests—to league with the Prince against that lady, you can well comprehend that her conduct has not been such as to excite any compunction or remorse in my breast so as to induce me to hesitate ere I undertake this crusade against her."

"But I do not yet comprehend how it will serve your views to adopt such a course," said the Amazon.

"In a very few words I can explain myself," answered Meagles. "We wish to obtain as complete a hold upon the Prince as possible—do we not? Well—let him break with Mrs. Fitzherbert—let him marry the Princess of Brunswick—and he is ten thousand times more effectually in our power than at the present moment. For we possess the *proofs* of his union with Mrs. Fitzherbert—a Catholic——"

"I understand, Tim," interrupted Lady Lade: "an exposure of this marriage would prove ruinous to George, whether as Prince of Wales or King of England—and, as you justly observed, he becomes more completely enmeshed in our snares than ever."

"Then you approve of the course which I have undertaken to adopt?" said Meagles, inquiringly.

"Yes—now that I consider it in all its bearings," replied the Amazon. "Well," she added, with another merry laugh, "I do really believe that you will die a Duke in the end, Tim. But, remember," she exclaimed, her mirth subsiding into an arch smile,—"remember that I am also *to* be a Duchess."

"I have not forgotten our bargain, my love," exclaimed Meagles.

Thus speaking, he put spurs to his steed; and the party broke into a sharp trot.

It was about a quarter to five when they entered the town of Windsor; and, proceeding direct to the White Hart hotel, they put up their horses at the stables belonging to that establishment. Meagles then made inquiries of the landlord as to the probability of obtaining an audience of His Majesty that evening: but by the answers he received, he was speedily convinced that he must postpone all hope of seeing the King until the following morning. He accordingly signified his intention of passing the night at the hotel, and the landlord forthwith led the way to a handsome suite of apartments.

Being thus installed at the White Hart, in company with the Amazon, Meagles ordered an excellent dinner; while Wasp, who had received a hint to speak of the huntress as his master's wife was suitably provided for in the kitchen.

By means of an excellent bottle of claret and a pleasant conversation, Tim Meagles and Lady Lade whiled away the time until eleven o'clock, when they retired to rest in each other's arms.

At half past nine on the following morning they were seated at breakfast; and when the meal was concluded, they sallied forth from the White Hart and proceeded in the direction of the Castle.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE INTERVIEW.

We must now request our readers to accompany us into a small but elegantly furnished apartment in Windsor Castle.

A cheerful fire blazed in the grate; and, standing on the rug, with one arm leaning on the mantel, King George the Third was dictating a letter to a young lady of great beauty who was seated at a superb writing-table.

His Majesty was at this time fifty-seven years old. Naturally of a robust and vigorous constitution, he seemed well adapted to maintain a successful struggle against the influence of advancing age: but Care had accomplished what Time could not do—and had bowed the form and traced wrinkles upon the countenance of that monarch.

For, Oh! deep was the sorrow which his heart cherished, and bitter was the remorse which wrung his soul with anguish; and there were moments,

and hours, and days in that King's life when he envied the lot of the poorest of his subjects, and when they would not have envied him had all been known.

It has hitherto been the custom and the fashion to speak of George the Third in terms of praise: historians for the most part denominate him a good King—and monarchy-worshipping panegyrists have endowed him with every possible virtue. He has been called the Father of his People—the Paternal Sovereign—and a Pattern of Virtue and Morality: the world has been gravely told that England never was so happy, prosperous, and free as under his rule;—and it seems so natural to speak of "the good old times" of George the Third, that thousands of our readers will doubtless be astonished and startled when we assure them that a more infamous miscreant never disgraced a throne than that man!

A superstitious bigot in religious matters—entertaining the most implicit belief in the divine right of Kings—looking upon the people as having been made for him, and not himself for the people—of such a diabolically cruel disposition that he never would exercise the prerogative of mercy, but gloated over the idea of miserable wretches being strung up in dozens and half-dozens at a time—so heartlessly tyrannical that he waged a sanguinary war against the brave Americans when they so gloriously threw off his infernal yoke—so wedded to despotic notions that he expended hundreds of millions of treasure and poured forth British blood in torrents in order to combat the French Revolution and its effects—and of such a base, mean, cowardly, and despicable character that he not only persecuted men with unrelenting bitterness for their political and religious opinions, but also employed spies, agents, and informers to get up public meetings and disturbances, in order that the people might be mown down by artillery and cut to pieces by charging cavalry,—such was George the Third!

But who was the beautiful young woman that was writing at the table on the occasion of which we are now especially speaking?

She was the King's favourite daughter, the Princess Amelia.

In personal appearance and in disposition there was a great similitude between this Princess and her sister Sophia, whom we have already introduced to our readers.

The beauty of Amelia was however, of a more voluptuous cast than that of Sophia.

Her complexion was dazzlingly fair—enriched upon the cheeks with the sweetest and most delicate vermeil bloom. When her mind was perfectly tranquil and her pulses were not quickened by the excitement of thoughts, or passions, or emotions,—then did the soft lustre of her large blue eyes shed the calmest expression over her entire countenance, giving an air of pensive repose to her features. When gently moved by pleasurable feelings, the glances of those azure orbs and the soft smile that played around her mouth, denoted the union of a warm heart with a kind and generous nature: but when more profoundly excited, the looks and the manners of the Princess evinced all the vivid and varying sensibilities of an impassioned woman. Then, too, her eyes would swim in a voluptuous languor: the flush of sensuality would appear upon her countenance—and the heightening scarlet of the full, pouting, and almost coarse lips would indicate strong desires and a licentious imagination.

Her figure was more full and of richer contours than even that of her sister Sophia. Her sloping shoulders were softly rounded, giving her the faintest, slightest semblance of stooping: and yet they borrowed the appearance of breadth from the well-expanded chest, whence the bosoms rose grandly. But in their luxuriance, these large glowing orbs were scarcely divided in the middle—while laterally they protruded on the space occupied by the arms. The whole form of the Princess Amelia was characterised by *embonpoint*, and was soft, full, and voluptuous in the extreme,—leaving the waist, however, sufficiently symmetrical, though by no means sylph-like. Indeed, her Royal Highness was a perfect Hebe in the style of her beauty and the luscious ripeness of her charms;—and, alike in person and in temperament, did she appear to have been formed by nature for the enjoyment of wanton pleasures.

Over those shoulders so dazzlingly white,—not snowy nor like alabaster, but of the inimitable whiteness of living flesh which is fair and soft to the eye,—over those shoulders, we say, flowed a profusion of silky hair, not so colourless as flaxen nor so deep as auburn—but of the bright and glossy golden hue which exists between.

Such was the Princess Amelia;—and although her form, expanded into the luxuriance of womanhood, gave her the appearance of at least three or four and twenty years of age,—yet in reality was she only eighteen.

It was about a quarter past ten o'clock in the morning when we thus introduce our readers to the King and his favourite daughter.

The former was dictating, and the latter was writing, a letter to the Princess Caroline of Brunswick, who had already been fixed upon as the future spouse of the Prince of Wales: for whenever a member of the English Royal Family requires a husband or a wife, as the case may be, recourse is invariably had to the tribe of beggarly German pauper princes and princesses;—and thence has it arisen that England is either infested with these greedy and disgusting foreign leeches whose ravenous maws are never satiated with drinking the heart's blood of the toiling, starving, oppressed, and trampled-on industrious classes,—or else our treasury is compelled to grant revenues to those petty potentates who would not even be blessed with a thatch to their houses if it were not for British gold.

But John Bull is the greatest fool in all Christendom; for not contented with ministering to the rapacity of those titled robbers denominated the aristocracy, he must need permit the paltriest German rascals and demireps that ever bore jaw-breaking names to plunder him in the most flagrant manner, just because they are Grand-Dukes or Dukes, and Grand-Duchesses or Duchesses!

Let us however continue our narrative before we lash ourselves into a fury at these iniquities.

The Princess Amelia had just closed, sealed, and addressed her letter, when a page entered to inform his Majesty that a lady and gentleman humbly besought an audience on behalf of certain matters connected with his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

At the mention of his eldest son's name, a cloud spread rapidly over the countenance of the King: but checking the ejaculation of displeasure which had risen to the very tip of his tongue, he demanded whether the lady and gentleman who sought an interview had given their names.

The page handed his Majesty a card, whereon appeared the name of MR. MEAGLES.

"I've heard of him—I've heard of him!" ejaculated the monarch, flinging the card petulantly upon the writing-table, and speaking with more than his usual volubility. "Pitt, who knows everything—everything—says he's a sad dog—sad dog. And he's very intimate with George, too—very intimate: a drinking companion, I'll be bound—I'll be bound. I will not see him at all," added the King, turning abruptly towards the page and speaking as savagely as if it were the page himself who was giving offence or annoyance.

The youth bowed and was retreating towards the door, when the Princess Amelia, who had taken up the card and looked at it, made a rapid sign for him to remain: then, rising from her seat, and approaching her father, she said, "You know, sire, that this gentleman—Mr. Meagles, I believe," she added, glancing at the card to assure herself that she had pronounced the name correctly,—"is a very intimate friend of my brother; and it can be no ordinary matter which has led Mr. Meagles to solicit a private audience of your Majesty."

"Do you think so, 'Melia?—do you think so?" exclaimed the King, who had a nervous habit of reiterating the half broken and jerking kind of sentences of which his conversation was composed.

"I do indeed think, my dear father, that you ought to see this Mr. Meagles," said the Princess, in a firm tone but with a sweetly coaxing and irresistibly winning manner.

"Well, well—I will see him—Meagles, eh?—Meagles—Meagles," exclaimed his Majesty, as if practising his tongue to pronounce the name correctly. "Queer appellation, that—very queer! Meagles—Meagles—Meagles," continued the monarch, in a musing style.

"The page is awaiting your Majesty's commands," said the Princess.

"Oh! commands—eh? Meagles—eh?" cried the King, still harping with a species of childishness or imbecility upon the name. "Meagles—Meagles! Well—let Mr. Meagles be introduced into our presence—and Mrs. Meagles, too: for I suppose it must be Mrs. Meagles who is with him. Meagles—Meagles!"

And his Majesty kept on repeating the name for at least a dozen times, but in a sinking tone—so that at last the iteration ended in an inaudible whisper.

The page, understanding that he was to bring the visitors into the royal presence, bowed and withdrew; and the Princess Amelia likewise retired.

King George the Third then began to pace the room in a nervous manner and with uneven steps—renewing his muttered iterations of the name of Meagles.

At length the door was thrown open—and the page announced "Mr. and Mrs. Meagles" in a loud voice.

Another moment—and Tim and the Amazon stood in the presence of the King!

Now George the Third was a great stickler for Court etiquette; and when his eyes encountered the gentleman in a riding-dress and the lady in her male attire, each too with whip in hand, a frown of displeasure gathered rapidly upon that countenance which was usually so stolid, vacant, and inane in its expression.

Meagles instantaneously saw that the King was displeased — and the huntress also observed that sinister cloud spreading upon the royal features and the truth struck them both at the same instant But for this little incident they were not altogether unprepared; and Meagles hastened to offer those excuses which he deemed suitable.

"Your Majesty is surprised—and doubtless offended," he said, in a very respectful tone, "that Mrs. Meagles should have ventured to appear in such an attire before your Majesty—or that I should have been bold enough to come hither otherwise than in the costume befitting a Court. But we are plain, honest, every-day kind of people; and we hope your Majesty will give us credit for acting on the impulses of a moment when the object is to serve a friend. In plain terms, the business which has brought us to Windsor Castle is of so pressing a nature that we really had not time to make any change in our costume."

"And your name is Meagles—Meagles—eh?" gasped the King, eyeing him with great suspicion.

"Such is my name, at your Majesty's service," was the reply. "Your Majesty's son, the Prince of Wales, usually calls me 'Tim'—and sometimes '*My dear Tim.*' As for my creditors—they call me '*honest Mr. Meagles.*'"

"Well—well," exclaimed his Majesty, not knowing exactly what to make of the gentleman, and uncertain whether to give him credit for matchless impudence or genuine John Bull bluntness: "we shall know more of you presently, I dare say—I dare say. And this is Mrs. Meagles—eh?"

"That is Mrs. Meagles, may it please your Majesty," answered Tim.

"Fine woman—monstrous fine woman," muttered the King to himself, as he surveyed the Amazon from head to foot: and, while his eyes were thus wandering leisurely and scrutinizingly over her splendid form, as she stood in a graceful attitude of dignified self-possession before him, a glimmering of satisfaction appeared upon his countenance. "Ah! fine woman, Mrs. Meagles," he repeated in a louder tone: "very fine woman—Mrs. Meagles—monstrous fine woman! Dress not so unbecoming after all—not near so unbecoming: rather suitable, on the contrary—rather suitable."

And then, turning slowly away, he seated himself in an arm-chair near the writing-table.

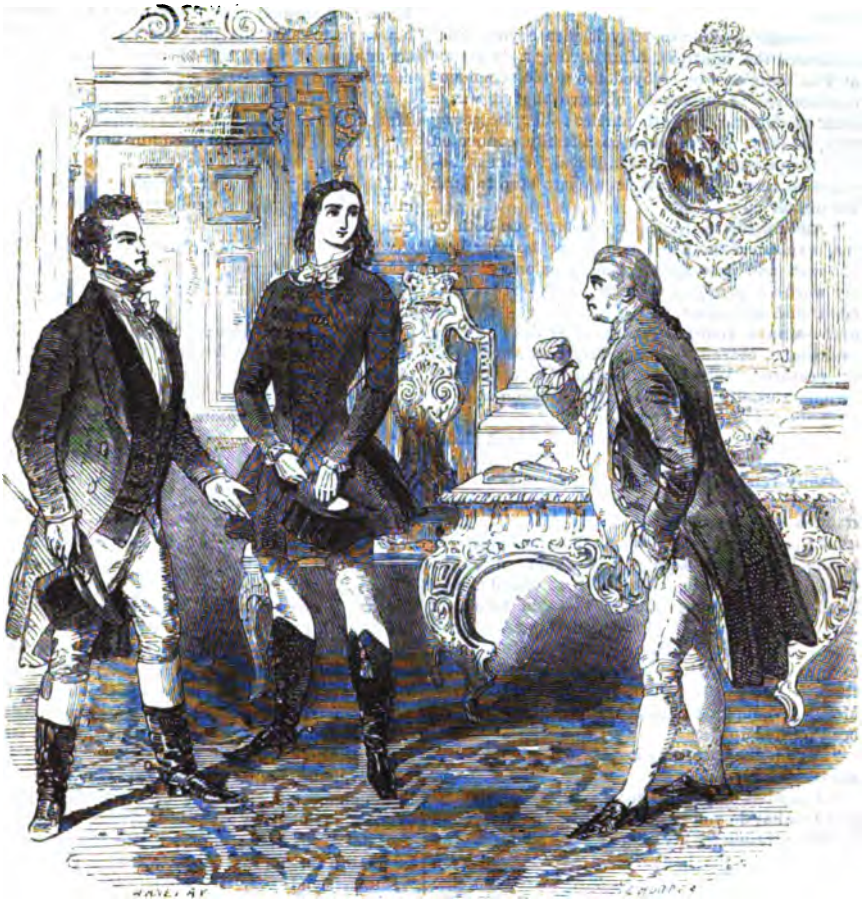
"You've quite charmed his wicked old eye, my beauty," said Meagles in a low tone to the Amazon.

"Eh! what—what?" ejaculated the King, starting up again. "What's that you said, Mr. Meagles—what's that? Something about an eye?"

"I ventured to observe, sire," was the cool but respectful response, "that I flattered myself that my wife had found favour in your Majesty's royal eye."

"Oh! ah! Well—there's no harm in saying that—no harm at all, Mr. Meagles," exclaimed King George the Third, quietly resuming his seat. "Come, now—what is the motive of your presence here?—why have you besought an audience of your Sovereign? From the observations you have already made, Meagles, I do not suppose that the Prince has wronged this lady—your wife, I mean—Mrs. Meagles."

"Very far from it, may it please your Majesty," answered Tim. "The truth is, my wife is so deeply imbued with a sense of his Royal Highness's inva-



riable kindness, condescension, and goodness towards me, that she insisted upon accompanying me to Windsor Castle in the hope that her prayers and entreaties, when united with my own, would have additional weight in the consideration of your Majesty."

"Prayers!—entreaties! How now?" ejaculated the King. "What is the matter? Speak out, Meagles — or do you speak for your husband, madam."

"May it please your Majesty," said the Amazon, advancing a little closer towards the King, and then standing with a most graceful and elegant attitude in his presence,—"it is on behalf of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales that my husband and myself have ventured to appear before our Sovereign—fully convinced that our good and gracious King will at all events accord us a patient hearing, the more so inasmuch as it is no favour that we seek on our own account."

"Prettily expressed — musical voice — good teeth," muttered the King to himself: then, in a louder tone, he said, "Go on, Mrs. Meagles—I am listening with attention, Mrs. Meagles. Go on."

"Profoundly does it afflict me, may it please your Majesty," she resumed, "that——"

"No—no: it doesn't please me that you should be afflicted, Mrs. Meagles," exclaimed George III interrupting her in almost a playful manner. "But go on—go on—Mrs. Meagles: I'm all attention again—all attention."

"I was about to inform your Majesty," continued the Amazon, "that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has had the misfortune to seduce a young lady of good family——"

"Had the misfortune!" ejaculated the King, springing to his feet. "The misfortune do you call it, Mrs. Meagles?—misfortune, indeed—misfortune! And pray is there no misfortune on the other side? Has the young lady nothing to complain

of, Mrs. Meagles? Come—answer me. Misfortune, indeed!"

And his Majesty sank back again into the arm-chair.

"I meant to observe, may it please you, sire," continued the huntress, after darting a sly glance at Tim Meagles, who enjoyed the whole scene uncommonly,—"I meant to observe that it was a great misfortune for both parties:—for the young lady, because she belongs to a family connected with the peerage—and for his Royal Highness, because he must take some immediate step to hush the matter up."

"And for this purpose he has sent you both to me," exclaimed the King, once more leaping from his seat, and now flying into a passion. "Upon my word—a pretty misfortune, truly—seductions right and left come to my knowledge—and the hero—always George Prince of Wales! Pretty misfortune, indeed! Young lady connected with the peerage! Who is she, madam?" he demanded, turning abruptly round upon the Amazon as if he were about to snap her head off.

"Her name is Octavia Clarendon, may it please your Majesty," was the response: "her father is distantly related to the Lord Marchmont."

"Ah! the Lord Marchmont—good Tory—staunch supporter—pillar of the throne!" ejaculated the King: then growing considerably calmer, he shook his head, saying. "This affair must indeed be looked into. Won't do to offend a man like Lord Marchmont—always votes in favour of Ministerial measures. Lord Marchmont—good Tory—would vote black's white, or white's black, to please me. Ah! he is a true aristocrat—a staunch noble—Lord Marchmont! Well Mrs. Meagles—I suppose that as yet this misfortune has been hushed up?"

"Such is the case, may it please your Majesty," answered Lady Lade.

"And what do you propose?—what do you suggest?—what do you require me to do?" demanded the King, resuming his seat.

"To confer the honour of a peerage, with an accompanying pension, upon Mr. Clarendon, the father of this young lady whom the Prince has seduced," was the response.

"Never!" ejaculated George III, his puffy cheeks becoming purple with rage: and, bounding from his chair, he stood for a few moments gazing ferociously upon the Amazon, but unable to utter another word. "No—never!" he at length exclaimed. "I am not to be persuaded into such a course as this. What! dishonour the peerage by selling it, as it were, for a girl's beauty! Upon my word, Mrs. Beagles—no, Meagles—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Meagles—I am surprised that you and your husband should have had the audacity to seek my presence for such a purpose. Our interview is at an end—the audience is closed."

And the King, turning abruptly away, was advancing towards the door of an inner room, when Tim Meagles exclaimed, "One word, may it please your Majesty!"

"One word?" repeated the King, stopping short. "What for, sir?—what more can you or your wife have to say to me? One word, indeed—one word!"

"Yes—one word," exclaimed Meagles, emphatically: "for your Majesty does not appear to be fully aware of the seriousness—the extreme seriousness——"

"The seriousness of what, sir!" demanded the King, now turning completely round and retracing his steps towards his importunate visitors: "the seriousness of what, sir—of what?" he reiterated nervously.

"Of his Royal Highness's position," answered Meagles, in a firm and resolute manner.

"It is not I who have placed him in it," exclaimed his Majesty: "he has done it all himself—all himself. You may retire, Mr. Meagles—Meagles—you may retire: any further colloquy will be useless—quite useless."

"Nay—then your Majesty will drive his Royal Highness to extremes," said Tim; "and the unpleasant effects of this affair will not be experienced by him alone."

"What do you mean, sir?" inquired the King, struck by the mingled singularity and audacity of an observation the covert menace of which was unmistakable: "what do you mean? Speak—sir: what do you mean?" he repeated petulantly.

"I mean, sire," responded Tim Meagles, looking the monarch full in the face, "that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales will not fall alone. If he sink beneath the weight of infamy and shame, he will drag down others with him—yes—even though it be his own father. And that is God's truth!"

George III sank upon a chair, gasping for breath. Was it possible that he had heard aright?—or had his ears deceived him? He closed his eyes for a few moments, the more easily to commune with himself by shutting out all exterior objects from his view: and this brief but painful interval of reflection convinced him that it was no delusion—that his ears had not misled him—and that a threat, darkly intelligible, had been uttered by daring man who still stood in his presence.

Then all the vindictive blood of the Guelphs rushed to his countenance—tinging even the whites of his eyes and making the orbs themselves seem ready to start out of his head: and, springing from his chair, he threw a furious look upon Meagles, exclaiming, "I understand you, sir—I understand you! My son has made you the instrument and agent of his own vile undutifulness; and you are base enough to lend yourself to his parricide intentions. But you may return to him, sir—you may return to him—and tell him that I defy his menaces. Yes—I—his father—I—the King—scorn and laugh at this silly attempt—to—to——"

"Your Majesty should know that hard words do not break bones," interrupted Tim Meagles, in a tone and manner so full of easy defiance that the King was perfectly staggered. "Your Majesty has thought fit to couple my name in an injurious fashion with that of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales: but I am tough enough to bear all your Majesty has just said—and a great deal more."

"This to me, sir!" ejaculated George III, now literally foaming with rage. "Begone!"—and he extended his hand towards the bell-pull.

"One word!—only one word more!" cried Meagles. "Does your Majesty really wish that a certain certificate should be published to the world——"

"I care not!" exclaimed the King, still holding the bell-pull. "As my scapegrace son's boon companion, you are of course in the secret respecting that fragment of a document——"

"Fragment!" repeated Meagles; "fragment did your Majesty say? I beg your pardon, sire—but the whole paper is in our possession—in my possession——"

"It's false, sir—it's false!" ejaculated George III. "My son has often told me that before—but he never could produce more than one-half——"

"Your Majesty may now, therefore, have an opportunity of seeing the whole," said Meagles, in a tone of calm confidence almost bordering upon cool insolence, as he displayed the perfect certificate.

"And a very pretty production it would be to print and issue to the world," observed the Amazon, again coming to her paramour's assistance.

"Ah! you would not dare—no—you could not," gasped the wretched King, as the proof—the damning proof of his atrocious perjury to Hannah Lightfoot was thus placed before his eyes: for a single glance at the document was sufficient to convince him that the missing half was really found, and that no forgery had been accomplished to supply its place.

Sinking back into the seat which he had resumed and quitted with such nervous frequency during this memorable interview, the King covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud in the bitterness of his spirit. He forgot that there were persons present to see and hear him: and even if he had remembered the fact, he could not have suppressed that evidence of emotions profoundly excited.

For, oh! in the heart of this tyrant King a certain chord had been made to vibrate with ineffable anguish; and with whirlwind speed had memory traversed the gulf of many, many years,—going back to those days—the days of his youth—when he had loved for the first time—nay, for the only time in all his life—and when he tasted of that drop of balm which turns the gall of this world's cup into a delicious nectar. For such is woman's affection: and it was the love of a tender and confiding soul which was given to him! Then, although he had learnt to appreciate how delicate is the fabric of the female heart, yet had he rudely broken the hallowed tie which bound such a heart to him; and he knew that the being who had adored him too tenderly and cherished his image all too fondly, had gone down into a premature grave—the victim of his perjury—a sacrifice to his broken vows! Long years—oh! long and many years had been reckoned and numbered since *then*: he had married *another*—and a numerous family had sprung up around him. But though perfidy may have its hour and seduction its triumph, yet remorse never fails sooner or later to exact its debt. And thus were there seasons when the soul of this bad King was rent with the anguish of a conscience suffering all the torture and crucifixion of memory's scorpion-stings: for though time had passed over his heart, it was only to reveal it, in his old age, like the disentombed city, with all the hopes and passions of an earlier period preserved in the very lava which had choked them!

For nearly five minutes did King George III remain thus absorbed in the most excruciating reflections: and Tim Meagles and the Amazon dared not even exchange glances with each other—for they felt a secret awe at having thus plunged a crowned monarch into so deep an abyss of humiliation and mental pain.

At length the King raised his head hastily;—and, beckoning Meagles to approach, he said in a low and sadly altered tone, "Am I to understand that the document which you have shown me will be given up when the demand of my son is complied with?"

"Your Majesty cannot expect that I should part with so interesting a relic," observed Meagles: then fixing his eyes significantly upon the monarch's countenance, he added, "Such a piece of paper, sire, is worth a dukedom."

"Heaven protect my son—heaven guard him from these extortioners—when he succeeds me!" murmured the King, with a slight access of returning irritability: but, immediately suppressing his rising anger and steadying his trembling nerves with all the effort of which he was capable, he said in a loudes tone, "Mr. Meagles, you will not publish that document?—you cannot wish to do so? No—no—I am sure you cannot. And now listen to me attentively—very attentively."

His Majesty paused for a few moments, while both Meagles and the Amazon drew nearer towards him.

"You are sensible people — both of you—very sensible people, I am confident," resumed the King; "and you must therefore see that I cannot grant a peerage in this abrupt, sudden, and extraordinary manner. But I will tell you what I can do, Mr. Meagles—and Mrs. Meagles. I will speak to Pitt about Lord Marchmont—I will tell him that I wish to confer a mark of my esteem on that nobleman—and then he will institute inquiries respecting his lordship's family and relatives. You understand me—eh? Well, the name of Mr. Clarendon will thus transpire—and all I want is to be able to bring it on the *tapis*. The rest is easily managed—easily managed," added the King, speaking in a musing tone to himself rather than addressing his words to those whose ears they however reached. "Yes—yes—there will be no difficulty—no difficulty. Mr. Meagles—Mr. Meagles," exclaimed his Majesty with startling suddenness after a few moments' pause, —"you may return to my son and inform him that for the last time I consent to help him out of his embarrassment. Within a week or ten days a peerage shall be offered to this Mr. Clarendon of whom you have spoken. In the interval the most rigid secrecy must be maintained respecting the negotiation. I presume that your Mr. Clarendon is as yet ignorant of his daughter's shame?"

Meagles replied in the affirmative.

"So much the better," continued the King, speaking in a more collected manner than he had yet done. "Now, understand me well, Mr. Meagles—and you also, Mrs. Meagles,—understand me, I repeat, when I say that not a hint of all this must be breathed to Mr. Clarendon until my Minister shall have officially communicated my royal will and pleasure with regard to him. On the same day that this communication is made, the Prince of Wales shall receive a hint to that effect. Then—and not till *then*, Mr. Meagles—may it be intimated to Mr. Clarendon that this boon of a peerage, with an accompanying pension, is the price of his silence and forbearance—— You know what I mean," added the monarch impatiently, as he sprang with characteristic abruptness from his seat.

"I understand your Majesty fully," said Meagles; "and I thank your Majesty for the gracious promise of which I shall now be the joyful messenger to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

The King scarcely waited to hear the conclusion of this sentence, but retired to the inner room.

Tim Meagles and the Amazon then quitted Windsor Castle, well pleased with the result of their interview.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE PRINCESS AMELIA.

THE favourite daughter of George III, upon leaving the King in order that he might grant an audience to Mr. Meagles and his fair companion, retired into an adjacent room, where she endeavoured to amuse herself with a book. But feeling convinced that something unpleasant had occurred in respect to her brother the Prince of Wales, and dreading that such intelligence might produce a disagreeable effect upon her father, her uneasiness became most painful; and when she heard the King talking in a loud and angry tone in the next room, she was quite unable to endure the torture of suspense any longer.

Approaching the door communicating with that apartment, she became a listener just at that point in the discourse when her father, interrupting the Amazon's narrative, dwelt with such emphatic reiteration on the word "misfortune." But it was not until several more sentences had been exchanged between his Majesty and the Amazon, that the Princess Amelia learnt the entire truth: namely, that her eldest brother had seduced a young lady of respectable family—that the name of the victim was Octavia Clarendon—that she was related to Lord Marchmont—and that a peerage and pension for the father were suggested as the means of hushing up the girl's disgrace and the heir-apparent's treachery.

The Princess Amelia was shocked, certainly—but not particularly amazed. The irregularities, gaieties, and gallantries of her eldest brother were too numerous, too notorious, and too flagrant to be entirely a secret to her; and indeed, the King was often wont to deplore, when alone with his favourite daughter, the course of life which the Prince of Wales was leading.

She was not surprised, then, we say, when from the discourse now passing between his Majesty and the Amazon she gathered the particulars of her brother's new freak and the embarrassment in which it had plunged him: nor was she astonished when her sire so peremptorily and irascibly refused the peerage which was demanded for Mr. Clarendon.

But no pen can depict her amazement and indignation when she heard Meagles take up the thread of the conversation and utter dark menaces. She could scarcely believe her ears: she listened with suspended breath;—her bosom was as motionless and still as if she were a marble statue!

"I mean, sire, that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales will not fall alone. If he sink beneath the weight of infamy and shame, he will drag down others with him—yes—even though it be his own father."

Such were the words which the Princess Amelia caught: such were the words that her brother's emissary dared address to her own father—the King of England!

But the scene which followed was of more ominous significancy and more tremendously mysterious import. For Meagles grew bolder: he spoke in a tone of easy defiance to his Majesty;—and then came the rapidly exchanged but emphatic sentences concerning the certificate.

The Princess Amelia was stupified—astounded. Pale as marble, she leant against the door for support. She heard her father sob—and she could not fly to his assistance. Her limbs were paralysed—her very breath was suspended. A dumb, dead bewilderment was upon her: an awful consternation held her powerless—motionless—voiceless. Even her eyes did not wink—her lips remained apart—her breast was upheaved and still.

What could the document be that Meagles had produced?—what spell did it exercise over her sire?—what crime or misfortune on his part had endowed it with such appalling influence?

Fleet as lightning did these questions flash through her brain:—but how was her imagination to suggest the answers to them?

Hark!—the silence in the next room is now broken again: the King speaks. She listens, as if her life were dependent on catching the words which he utters. He demands that the document be given up to him. Meagles refuses. Nay—he even declares with confidence that its price is a dukedom!

A cold tremor—as if a snake were slowly coiling its slimy folds about her—passed gradually over the form of the Princess: for that her father must have committed some dreadful crime, or that Meagles was the depositor of some tremendous secret respecting the Royal Family, was evident. Otherwise, how would this man have dared not only to bandy words with the King of England—but likewise to dictate his own terms in a tone proving that he had not miscalculated the extent of the terrible influence which he thus wielded over the unhappy monarch.

And now the Princess Amelia heard her sire assent to those conditions—nay, even humiliate himself so far as to admit that he must use subterfuge and artifice with his Prime Minister in order to procure the peerage and the pension for Mr. Clarendon.

A death-like sensation came upon the wretched Princess. She loved her father as dearly as ever child was devoted to a parent: and the discourse which she overheard had revealed things—or rather excited alarms and apprehensions of so vague, uncertain, yet terrible a character that the chill of the grave appeared to have seized upon her. But this feeling rapidly yielded to one more intense and excruciating still: for when she thought of the deep humiliation to which her father was reduced—and that father a King—she felt as if red-hot iron were searing her heart and drops of molten lead trickling upon her brain. Then—in order to avoid giving utterance to the hysterical cry which rose to her very lips—she suddenly tore herself away from the door to which her ear had hitherto been rivetted; and, with steps that were staggering and uneven although so rapid, she fled to her own apartment.

Throwing herself upon a sofa, the young Princess burst into an agony of weeping. Torrents of tears now poured forth from the eyes that had hitherto been so hot and dry; and her bosom—that fair virgin breast—heaved with convulsive sobs, as if her heart must break.

But in a few minutes that flood of anguish was followed by the relief which tears invariably afford; and the violence of her affliction subsided. By degrees, however, she experienced a suffocating sensation—a want of the fresh air—and a longing to feel

the cold breeze fan her burning brow and her flushed cheeks.

Hastily putting on a modest bonnet and a simple scarf lined with fur, the Princess descended to the gardens attached to the Castle. But perceiving some members of the royal household walking in those grounds, and wishing to give way in solitude to the thoughts which oppressed her, she turned her steps in another direction and entered the park.

So modest was her apparel—so mournful was her demeanour—so woe-begone her countenance—and so agitated her walk, that a stranger would never have suspected her to be one of the high-born and envied daughters of England's Royalty.

And, in truth, the young Princess was thoroughly wretched: for her soul was filled with the gloomiest presentiments in regard to her father—her eldest brother—aye, her entire family;—and she could not help thinking, within the profoundest recesses of her own heart, that there was a curse instead of a blessing attendant upon the British crown!

Presently her thoughts settled almost completely upon her eldest brother, the Prince of Wales; and so fully did she become absorbed in contemplating his career and painfully wondering to what ignominious catastrophe it would probably lead, that she forgot the scene which had ere now taken place at the Castle.

It was while in this deeply reflective mood, that the Princess Amelia suddenly observed an individual leaning in a melancholy attitude against a tree. Tall, well-formed, and handsomely dressed, this person immediately rivetted her gaze: for she felt convinced that it was the object of her thoughts—her brother—George Prince of Wales. His arms were folded across his ample chest—his eyes were fixed on the ground—he was evidently absorbed in deep meditation.

"Ah!" thought the Princess within herself; "I understand the meaning of his presence here! Tortured by suspense, he is waiting for his emissaries, to learn the issue of their interview with our august father. Poor brother! with all his faults I love him well—and more than ever now that I am confident he is unhappy! But at least it will be in my power to relieve him of that anxiety which is wringing his soul at present: yes—I can so far cheer him with the assurance that the peerage will be granted to Mr. Clarendon, and that the existing cause of a cruel embarrassment will therefore be hushed up."

These ideas rushed through the brain of the tender-hearted and amiable Princess in far less time than we have occupied in recording them; and hastily approaching the individual who was leaning against the tree, she threw herself upon his breast, overcome by her feelings—thus making him aware of her presence and her sorrow at the same instant.

The individual started with an amazement which the Princess did not however perceive—for she was now blinded with her tears and suffocated with her sobs. All the features—all the details—all the particulars of the scene which had taken place within the hour, rushed to her mind:—her father's humiliation—Meagles' triumph—the mysterious document—everything sprang into vivid being in her memory. And she knew that her brother was the cause of all the anguish, degradation, and disgrace through which her sire had thus passed: she recollected, moreover, that this same brother it was who had sent his emissaries to threaten, coerce, and intimidate that father whom she so fondly loved; and her gentle spirit was wounded sorely—her kind heart was rent with the cruel paroxysms which were only partially relieved by the torrents of tears that she now shed so abundantly, as she clung to the arms of him who supported her from falling.

"O George, my dearest brother! what have you done?" she exclaimed at length, but in a voice half suffocated with sobs. "Is it possible that you could have had recourse to menaces in order to compel your father—your King——"

"In the name of heaven, illustrious lady—for that such you are, I gather from your words—be cautious what you say. There is some strange mistake——"

A shriek burst from the lips of the Princess, as she started wildly from the half embrace in which she was held, or rather into which she had thrown herself: and casting one searching, penetrating, agonizing look upon the handsome though mournful countenance which now wore an expression of the profoundest respect mingled with a tender interest,—she exclaimed, "Just heaven! what have I done?"

And she would have fallen forward on the ground, had not the gentleman caught her in his arms.

But she had fainted!

He threw a rapid look around: not a soul was nigh to render aid or run for succour—the Castle was a mile distant—and there was not even a drop of water near to sprinkle upon the marble brow of the Princess—for such he concluded, from the words she had spoken, that she must be.

Kneeling upon the grass, he sustained her in his arms—loosened the scarf lined with furs from about her neck—unfastened the ribands of her bonnet—and thus did all he could, consistently with an honourable delicacy and propriety, to give her air.

Then, as she lay thus motionless and deprived of sense in his arms, he could not help being struck by the loveliness of her countenance and the softly rounded outlines of her figure. Even amidst the deep melancholy which filled his breast, there stole into existence a feeling of the tenderest interest as he thus contemplated the inanimate form of the Princess. Her face, from which all the colour had fled, was so exquisitely sweet and so touchingly beautiful in its death-like rigidity and its marble hue, that it appeared as if the dream of a poetic genius had been wrought into mimic life by the hand of the statuary. And as the individual who sustained her in his arms gazed on that countenance, a deep, deep sigh rose from the profoundest abyss of his soul: for had any one a few minutes previously assured him that his feelings would be stirred so soon and his heart moved by the beauty of aught in female shape, he would have declared that love for him was as a flower which had faded in his soul—a leaf which had withered—and that naught could re-awaken the subtle passion, nor rekindle its volcanic fire to dart through the ruins it had once filled and scorched!

And now a tender bloom began to re-appear upon the cheeks of the Princess—a deeper tint suffused the lips that were now stirred with the wavering breath of returning animation—her bosom rose and fell slowly, but visibly—and opening her azure

orbs she gazed up into the countenance that was bending over her.

At first there was a dull vacancy in that look—but the next moment the pupils of those sweet eyes were lighted up with the resuscitating beams of intelligence;—and recollecting all that had occurred, the Princess said in a faint and tremulous tone, "I thank you, sir, for this kind attention on your part. A mistake—a strange mistake——"

And stopping short, as the reminiscence flashed to her mind that she had thrown herself weeping and sobbing upon the breast of a stranger, she blushed the deepest crimson.

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured that I am a man of honour," was the earnest and impressive response, as the gentleman delicately and tenderly assisted the Princess to regain her feet; "and the words which fell from your lips ere now shall never be repeated by me. I can well understand how the error occurred—for I am no stranger to the fact that a marvellous resemblance subsists between myself and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"So extraordinary a likeness I never beheld till now!" murmured the Princess Amelia, casting a timid look upon the countenance which still wore an expression of extreme mournfulness mingled with a tender interest: then, hastily re-arranging her dress, she said, "Again I thank you, sir, for the courtesy—nay, the generosity of your behaviour towards me. May I request to be made acquainted with the name of one to whom I shall ever be under a great obligation?"

"Doubtless my romantic history and cruel misfortunes are not altogether unknown even to a lady so highly placed and so far removed from the world's ordinary sphere, as your Royal Highness," said the gentleman. "For a short time was I the object of universal execration. A number of crimes, any one of which was sufficient to stamp a man with unredeemable infamy——"

"Ah! I know you, sir—and I sincerely, most sincerely sympathise with your misfortunes," exclaimed the Princess Amelia, a sudden light breaking in upon her memory. "I read your case in the newspapers—and I now recollect full well that mention was made of the extraordinary likeness which you were said to bear to the Royal Family. That the report was indeed true, the incident of this morning has fully proved," she added, casting down her eyes as a blush once more suffused her charming countenance: but almost instantly looking up again, she observed with a tone and manner of winning artlessness, "Sir Richard Stamford, you are a man of honour—and I need not blush like a guilty thing for an error into which I fell so innocently."

"Your Royal Highness may look upon the incident which has just passed, as if it had never occurred," said the baronet.

"Nay—it is not altogether in such a light that I wish to regard it," exclaimed the Princess: "because your conduct towards me has been too generous and too delicately attentive to permit such ingratitude as forgetfulness would be on my part. If you will become my companion to the Castle, I shall have much pleasure in presenting you to their Majesties——"

"Gracious Princess," Sir Richard Stamford hastened to observe, "you confer too much honour upon me. With delight shall I attend upon your Royal Highness to the immediate precinct of the regal dwelling; but I crave your pardon if I accompany you not beyond the threshold."

"Think you, Sir Richard Stamford, that you will be received with a cold and icy ceremony?" exclaimed the warm-hearted Princess. "No—no: I shall frankly and candidly inform my beloved father of the origin of our acquaintance—and he will thank you for your chivalrous behaviour towards his daughter. Come, Sir Richard Stamford—you shall escort me to the Castle."

And the Princess Amelia, with the most amiable cordiality of manner, but with all the maidenly dignity and graceful propriety of her rank and sex, took the arm which the baronet scarcely dared to offer her.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, as they proceeded slowly towards the Castle, "has honoured me with an invitation which under any circumstances would amount to a command, but which has been given in a tone of such kindness that it were an unpardonable rudeness and a coarse brutality on my part to offer an excuse. Nevertheless, I must incur the risk of your Royal Highness's displeasure——"

"You are incapable of deserving it, Sir Richard Stamford," hastily exclaimed the Princess Amelia. "If you do not wish to proceed beyond the threshold of the Castle, I shall give you credit for entertaining some good reason for declining my invitation—and we shall not be on less friendly terms on that account."

"Every word your Royal Highness utters lays me under a fresh obligation to you," said Sir Richard Stamford. "Permit me, then, to explain myself. My recent misfortunes have produced an effect which cannot be immediately mitigated—and never can be altogether subdued. A few weeks ago—and I was a happy husband, enjoying the blessings of a cheerful home and a wife whom I adored: now I am alone in the world—widowed in my love, and with my home a wreck! Impelled by a sense of duty towards society as well as by those feelings of vengeance which the most virtuous cannot altogether crush and annihilate at the bottom of their souls, I pursued my enemies until I sent them to the scaffold. Martin and Ramsey perished by the hand of the public executioner: but at the same moment that the drop fell, launching them into eternity—*then* also ebbed away the excitement which the proceedings taken against them had kept alive in my mind. A deep despondency supervened—and I felt that its influence was irresistible. I fled from the din of London—I sought the retirement of the environs of Windsor. Here have I dwelt for some days past—and when the weight of thought becomes intolerable, I rush out into the open air—I come hither—and in this park do I wander for hours. Sometimes I fear lest I should go mad: at others *I* seem to tremble upon the verge of suicide."

"Great heaven! talk not thus, Sir Richard Stamford," ejaculated the Princess, looking up into his countenance with an expression of such sympathy as a sister might evince towards a well-beloved brother; for she felt herself irresistibly drawn towards that unhappy gentleman whose misfortunes had constituted one of the most extraordinary romances in real life that ever became known to the world.

"I demand the pardon of your Royal Highness," said the baronet. "I am well aware that I ought not to intrude my sorrows upon you! But I was about to ask your Royal Highness whether it be fitting to introduce a man with such a ruined, shattered heart as mine, into the presence of your august parents? Oh! no—no: for the deeper the solitude in which I dwell—the more profound the misanthropy in which I shroud myself—the more inveterate the cynicism which henceforth shall characterise my existence——"

"Sir Richard Stamford," interrupted the Princess Amelia, speaking with a gravity which seemed singular not only for her years but likewise for the almost cherub style of beauty which marked her countenance,—"you must allow me to assume the part of a counsellor—an adviser—a friend. I will frankly inform you that when I read in the newspapers the romantic narrative of your sorrows and your wrongs, I conceived a boundless compassion for the man who had sustained such an accumulated weight of misery. Little did I imagine that I should ever encounter the hero of that mournful tragedy. But we have met—and under circumstances forming an appropriate sequence to your wild, wondrous, and touching history. For, at a moment when my own heart was swelling almost to bursting, I mistook you for that brother whose image absorbed all my thoughts—and you checked with a generous, noble, manly warning that outpouring of words which, flowing from my lips, might have conveyed revelations unfitted for any ear save that of a member of the Royal Family. This conduct on your part has made me your debtor—and has likewise augmented the interest which I already experienced in your behalf. Let me then address you as a friend; let me throw aside all affectation, and at once place myself on confidential terms with you. For although I am but a girl in years—yet in maturity of reflection and in steadiness of thought I flatter myself that I am a woman. Permit me, therefore, Sir Richard Stamford, to remind you that ideas of misanthropy and cynicism are not suitable to a man of true courage. No one has a right to withdraw himself from the world and turn hermit. If all who are unhappy were to fly into solitude, what would become of society? It would dwindle down into a waste—a wilderness—a desert. No—misanthropy is not the part which God destined human beings to play in this world. You have been sorely tried—woes of no ordinary magnitude have been heaped upon your head. The greater, then, will become the merit of patience—endurance—resignation."

"This is an angel breathing the sublimest truths in my ears!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford; and stopping short—dropping the arm of the Princess—he turned towards her, fixing his ravished, admiring, almost adoring gaze upon her countenance.

"I thank God that he has enabled my lips to utter words which have touched your heart," said the royal maiden, in a tone of the most holy and most unaffected sincerity. "Were I placed in another sphere," she continued, after a brief pause, "I should insist that you now accompanied me home—that you would suffer me to introduce you to my parents—that you would take up your abode with us for a few weeks, so that your bruised spirit might receive the anodyne which is found in cheerful society. But all this may not be," she added, laying her hand gently upon his arm and looking up mournfully into his countenance. "Nevertheless, as the daughter of your King, I have taken it upon myself to tender you my advice—to offer you the consolation which truthful doctrines may impart——"

"And you *have* consoled me, excellent-hearted Princess!" ejaculated the baronet. "Great heavens! to think that the female voice should ever again have had the power to reach a chord in my heart and make it vibrate! Methought that my soul was dead to all the tender sensibilities which woman's looks or words alone can kindle!"

"For a man to entertain such an opinion of himself, is the worst kind of scepticism, and must be offensive to his Maker," said the Princess Amelia, in a grave tone: "because it amounts to a denial of that hope which sustains us in our career, and which is an effluence from the divinity itself."

Again did Sir Richard Stamford gaze in mingled admiration and rapture upon that royal maiden whose character was so natural and without disguise,—whose manners were so impressive, and yet so winning in their almost infantile simplicity,—whose air was dignified, yet attempered by the sweetest feminine timidity,—and whose angelic countenance, though tender and languishing, was yet noble in its lineaments and characterised with an expression so purely gentle and confiding.

"Princess," said the baronet, in a voice deeply moved, "had any man prophesied to me an hour ago that it was possible for mortal tongue to pour solace into my soul, I should have shaken my head in token of incredulity: but had any one whispered in my ear that a daughter of the King would condescend even to trouble herself concerning my sorrows, I should have upbraided him with the astounding folly to which he was giving utterance. And yet, my God! both predictions, had they been made, would by this time have received their fulfilment;—and on my knees—Oh! on my knees, royal lady—must I pour forth the heartfelt gratitude which I experience for the angel-part which you have performed towards me!"

And, reckless whether there were thousands of eyes to behold the action, Sir Richard Stamford sank down at the feet of the Princess Amelia—took her hand—pressed it to his lips—and wept over it. Sweeping a half terrified glance around—then, bending her looks upon the baronet, when assured that no prying eyes beheld them—the Princess felt such strange and undefinable emotions stirring within her bosom, that she could not immediately give utterance to the words she wished to speak for the purpose of commanding him to rise from his suppliant posture. New intuitions appeared suddenly to spring up in her soul; and, when she did recover the power of language, it was in a deeply melting tone that she said, "Rise, sir—rise—you may be observed—and what will be thought of us both!"

Recalled to a sense of the inconsiderateness of that action to which however a deep and fervent sense of gratitude had impelled him,—Sir Richard Stamford sprang to his feet: then, when his eyes again met those of the Princess Amelia, he saw that she was blushing deeply. For the very words which she had last uttered had seemed inscrutably and mysteriously to link and associate themselves with the new feelings which were springing up in her bosom

and this germinating love at first sight—for such indeed it was—produced vague alarms, soft misgivings, and tender apprehensions never known before!

"Here we must part, Sir Richard," she said, after they had walked on for a little while in profound silence.

"Part!—what—so soon?" he exclaimed: and had death been the penalty for giving utterance to those words, he would have uttered them all the same—so unwitting, so improvised, so involuntary was the ejaculation.

"Yes—I must return to his Majesty," said the Princess, now suddenly recollecting the incidents that had sent her forth from the Castle to cool her burning brow in the park—those incidents which had gradually glided out of her memory in proportion as her interview with the Baronet became more intensely interesting.

"Farewell, then, generous-hearted Princess!" cried Sir Richard Stamford. "No words can convey all the illimitable gratitude which I experience towards you. But let me give your Royal Highness this assurance—that henceforth, when I wish to shape in my imagination the angels that are in heaven, I shall think of you."

Thus speaking, he raised her hand to his lips—kissed it fervently—and then hurried away.

The Princess Amelia watched his retreating form for nearly a minute, at the expiration of which she turned, with a profound sigh, towards the nearest avenue leading to the Castle.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

CAMILLA.

IMMEDIATELY after their interview with the King, Tim Meagles and Lady Lade went back to the hotel—paid the bill—ordered the horses—and returned at a smart pace to London.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the metropolis. The Amazon then hastened to her own home, to satisfy her doting and purblind husband with some excuse to account for her absence; while her paramour repaired to Carlton House.

Meagles found the Prince of Wales alone in his own chamber, not the slightest step towards a reconciliation between himself and Mrs. Fitzherbert having been made by either party: nor indeed, after the understanding to which the heir-apparent had come with his friend and counsellor, did he for an instant desire that the quarrel should be patched up. On the contrary, he thought that it would lead all the more easily to that complete rupture which his intensely selfish nature had contemplated and which Meagles had promised to carry into effect.

In order, therefore, to avoid the possibility of meeting Mrs. Fitzherbert, the Prince of Wales had shut himself up in his own room ever since the quarrel on the night of the ball; and during this interval he had divided the time between solitary drinking and feasting his imagination with the charms of Mrs. Brace's beautiful seamstress, Camilla Morton.

The Prince was overjoyed when Meagles, on appearing before him, at once put him out of suspense by declaring that the peerage would be granted to Mr. Clarendon.

"And how the devil did you manage it, my dear Tim?" demanded his Royal Highness, chuckling heartily.

"I thought it was an agreement between us that you should ask me no questions relative to the means which I might employ," said Meagles, flinging himself upon a seat and slashing his boot with his riding-whip.

"Ah! truly—and so it was," exclaimed the heir-apparent. "Then you saw the King?"

"Yes—we had a long chat with the old gentleman," observed Meagles, speaking of his Majesty in a free and easy, off-hand kind of a fashion.

"*We!*" ejaculated the Prince. "And who the devil went with you, then?"

"The Amazon—only the Amazon," answered Tim, quite coolly.

"Nonsense! you are humbugging me!" cried the heir-apparent.

"I assure you that it is truth," said Meagles, with a smile. "Lady Lade not only went with me—but likewise appeared before the King in her usual garb."

"And what in the name of everything sublime or ridiculous did our revered parent say?" demanded the Prince.

"Only that my wife—as his Majesty took her to be—was a monstrous fine woman," returned Meagles. "But let me tell you that without the Amazon I might not have succeeded at all. She menaced at one moment—coaxed at another—then reasoned—then pleaded—and in fine helped me considerably," he added, thus exaggerating the real truth in order to prevent the Prince from suspecting that he was in reality possessed of the Lightfoot certificate and had used it at Windsor.

"Capital!—capital!" ejaculated the heir-apparent, highly delighted at the idea of Lady Lade appearing with her huntress's garb in the presence of the ceremonious old King. "And when is this peerage to be granted?"

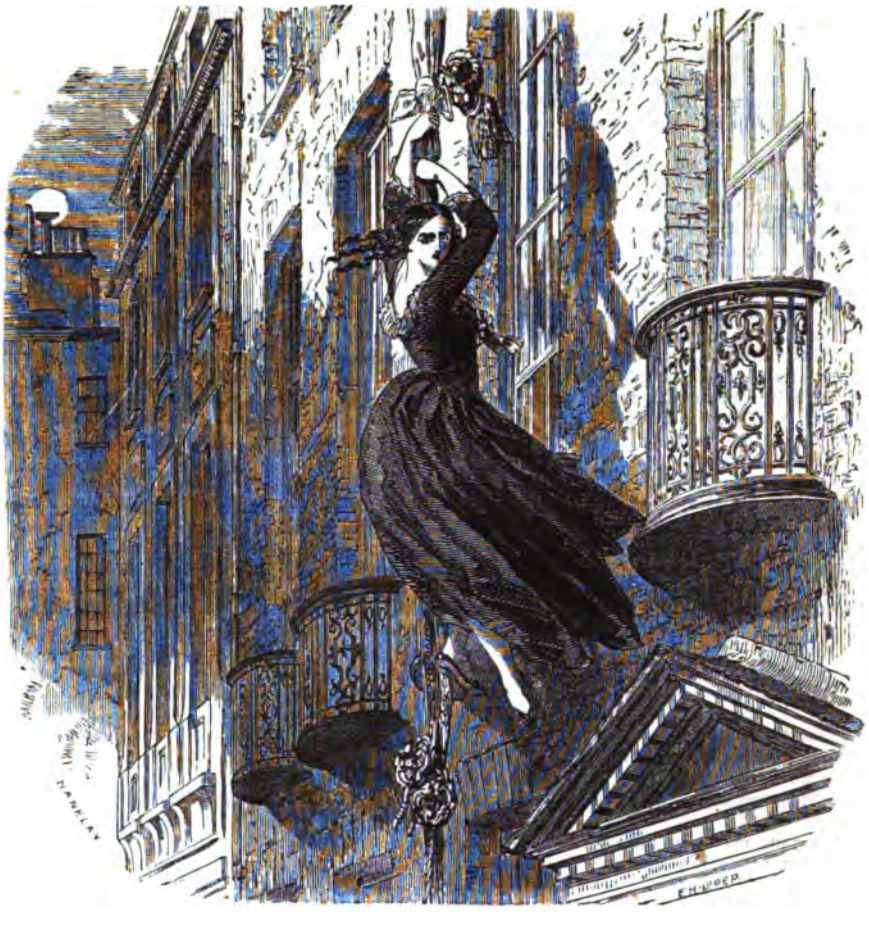
"In a week or ten days: and in the meantime you are to hold your tongue about it. His Majesty is going to manage it very cleverly: he means to wheedle Pitt out of it by dint of sheer artifice;—and therefore if a hint, or even the ghost of a rumour should get abroad in the interval——"

"Not a sentence shall fall from my lips, Tim, until the proper time," exclaimed the Prince. "If I hear or see anything of the Miss Clarendons, I will manage to appease them for the present somehow or another. And now that you have contrived to settle one thing for me—for I consider it to be as good as done—when shall we set about the other?"

"To-morrow, my dear Prince," replied Meagles. "About two o'clock in the afternoon I shall make my appearance in a genteel suit of black and solicit an immediate interview with Mrs. Fitzherbert. I cannot of course say how long our parley may last: but this I promise your Royal Highness—that she will not sleep beneath your roof to-morrow night."

"Bravo, Tim!" ejaculated the Prince. "You are really an excellent fellow. By the by, I have not found the papers, you know——"

"I dare say they will turn up some day or another," interrupted Meagles, rising from his seat. "Farewell for the present. To-morrow afternoon I shall pay my respects to your Royal Highness again—the moment I have made all necessary arrangements with Mrs. Fitzherbert.



"I shall be anxiously expecting you, Tim," said the Prince, extending his hand to his friend.

Meagles took his departure; and the heir-apparent, after cogitating for some minutes upon the successful issue of the trip to Windsor, penned a brief note to Mrs. Brace, informing her that he intended to pay her a visit in the evening and that he should pass the night at her house provided she could induce the beautiful Camilla Morton to share his couch

Having despatched this letter to the accommodating milliner, his Royal Highness lay down upon a sofa to indulge in a doze until dinner-time. A sort of half-waking dreamy slumber came slowly upon him—and, while having his eyes shut, he pursued a continuous train of reflections,—wondering whether he should really ever wear the English crown—and if he did, how the people could be such fools as to let him—and if he did not, what it might be that would prevent him—whether a revolution at home, or the propagandism of republicanism from France. Then he thought of the numerous proofs which the history of the past and the occurrences of the present afforded of the rapid decay of monarchical institutions; and he began to calculate how long the system was likely to last in this country. Ultimately he indulged in a tolerably hearty chuckle at the despicable folly of that long-eared jackass John Bull, who submits to be pillaged and plundered on all sides with so good a grace;—and having thus vented his mirth at the expense of those who were one day to become his subjects—or rather his slaves—he went off into a sound sleep, from which Germain awoke him at about eight o'clock.

This Leviathan of voluptuousness, profligacy, and scoundrelism, — this diabolical miscreant whose statue stands in Trafalgar Square as a flagrant insult to the People of Great Britain, and a shame and a scandal to civilisation itself,—this Prince of Wales, having dressed himself for dinner, sate down alone to the repast, and by means of the bottle whiled away

a couple of hours agreeably enough in his estimation.

He then muffled himself in his cloak—quitted Carlton House by the private staircase leading from his own bed-chamber—and passed hastily into St. James's Square. The door of that department of the milliner's establishment was speedily opened; and in a few minutes he was seated with Mrs. Brace in the little parlour to which allusion has been so frequently made in former chapters of our narrative.

To this lady the Prince speedily communicated the satisfactory intelligence that her advice had been adopted in respect to the means of propitiating Mr. Clarendon when he should come to know his daughter's shame; and the milliner was well pleased by the intelligence thus conveyed. She then spoke of the issue of the adventure at the ball, the failure of the Prince's attempt upon Lady Desborough having been already made known by him in a note which he had written to Mrs. Brace on the ensuing morning. His Royal Highness did not however at present seem in a humour to discuss that subject; but, hastily shifting the discourse, he demanded whether she had any good news for him respecting Miss Camilla Morton.

"I will tell you very candidly," answered Mrs. Brace, "that I am at a loss to comprehend this young girl. It was Sunday evening, you remember, that you supped with me, Camilla being present. All Monday I saw little of her, as I was much occupied during the day—and on the night I was at Carlton House, as you are aware. But yesterday I observed that there was some alteration in her manner. She either beheld me with an unwonted degree of timidity, or with suspicion—I know not which. I spoke kindly to her—she answered me in a tone that struck me as being cold and with an air that seemed reserved. Throughout yesterday she was thus peculiar in her manner; and to-day it has been the same," added the milliner: for it was on the Wednesday evening that the Prince and herself were thus conversing together.

"Think you, my dear Fanny," inquired his Royal Highness, "that she suspects who I am?"

"Decidedly not," responded Mrs. Brace. "If she did, she would not hesitate to tell me so—for, with all her natural timidity, she is a girl of a frank, artless, and ingenuous disposition."

"It was thus that I also read her character, on Sunday night," said the Prince. "Well, if she do not suspect who I am, what the devil misgiving can she entertain?"

"I know not. Perhaps she has overheard some incautious whisper on the part of the senior girls," added Mrs. Brace, in a musing tone. "There is one—Rachel Forrester—who will soon become a mother: and yet her position is not apparent—nor is she likely to commit any indiscretion in the presence of Camilla. In fact, I am quite bewildered what to make of the girl," exclaimed the milliner petulantly.

"Then you have not been able to arrange any plan——"

"Nothing at all," interrupted Mrs. Brace, laconically. "The truth is, my dear Prince," she observed, after a brief pause and lowering her tone, "Camilla is an orphan and totally friendless—and consequently there is not the same necessity to act in a slow, cautious, careful manner as when a young girl who has parents to fly to is concerned. Now, do you understand me?"

"I should be a perfect idiot if I did not," answered the heir-apparent. "You mean, my dear Fanny, that you leave Camilla Morton entirely to my management——"

"Yes: to your tender mercies," said the milliner, darting upon him a look full of significancy.

The Prince of Wales regarded his watch. It was close upon eleven o'clock. The young ladies had all retired to rest: but it was too early to think of putting his diabolical scheme into execution. He accordingly resolved to wait until near midnight; and Mrs. Brace covered the table with all the wines, spirits, and liqueurs that were likely to tempt the palate of his Royal Highness.

That, by the aid of curaçoa punch and some delectable conversation with the handsome milliner, the Prince whiled away the time until midnight.

"Now, my dear Fanny, I shall retire—I hope to paradise," said the heir-apparent, smiling at his own awful blasphemy. "But should any accident disappoint me—any unexpected event constrain me to beat a retreat—I shall find my way to your chamber, Fanny," he added, caressing her plump cheek with his hand.

"Indeed, my good friend," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, blushing and looking confused, "I must beg and implore you to leave me unmolested under any circumstances——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince, smiling significantly; "let us hope that my success with Camilla will be such as to render it unnecessary for me to seek a bed elsewhere. But I understand you, my cunning friend—you have a little intrigue of your own in progress to-night—eh? There, now—you need not blush nor cast down your eyes: I am well aware that you are not immaculate—and indeed I have no right to question you as to your proceedings. So give me a taper and conduct me to the door of Camilla's room."

Mrs. Brace said not a word: but, with the crimson hue still upon her cheeks, she rose—lighted a wax candle—and led the way noiselessly along the passage into that division of her premises which looked upon St. James's Square: for the sleeping-rooms of the young ladies were all, for obvious reasons, in this latter compartment of the spacious establishment.

Having ascended two flights of stairs, Mrs. Brace gave the Prince the candle—whispered the number of a certain room—and then rapidly withdrew.

His Royal Highness advanced along a passage which was so thickly carpetted that even if he had trodden as heavily as a cart-horse the sounds of his steps would have been deadened by the rich fabric. In a few moments he reached the room which had been described to him; and the door yielded to his hand. But on entering a small ante-chamber, he carefully closed it again behind him.

This ante-chamber was only a few feet square—just large enough to contain a bath. Facing the entrance by which the Prince had made his way hither, was a second door; and from beneath it as well as through the key-hole glimmered a feeble light. It was evident, therefore, that a candle burnt in Camilla Morton's room; and the Prince accordingly extinguished the wax light which he carried in his hand.

He now stooped down and peeped through the key-hole.

The young girl had not retired to rest. Seated at a table, on which her elbow rested—and with her head supported languidly upon her hand—she had a book before her; but, though her eyes were fixed upon it, she evidently was not reading. Her entire attitude as well as the expression of her countenance denoted deep thought. She was plunged in a profound reverie: and the subject of her meditations was not of a joyous description—for on each pale cheek a tear glistened in the feeble rushlight.

She had not as yet made the slightest preparation for retiring to rest. Her hair was still in the graceful bands in which she wore it, and in which arrangement it set off her intellectually beautiful and sweetly pensive countenance. Her deep mourning dress displayed the dazzling fairness of her complexion to its greatest advantage, and likewise developed the perfect symmetry of her sylphide form.

For several minutes did the royal voluptuary contemplate his intended victim by means of the keyhole; and the longer he gazed upon her, the more ardently did he burn to possess her.

And that she would become his prey beyond all possibility of salvation or rescue, he did not doubt: for well aware was he that every chamber in this department of the milliner's establishment was so skilfully and artfully arranged that no screams to which the tongue might give vent in one room could be heard in another. Besides, even if it were not so, the inmates of Mrs. Brace's abode were not of a character likely to afford the succour which even the acutest lamentation or the most rending entreaties might implore.

And with truth did we observe that the reverie of Camilla Morton was far from felicitous: for she *did* entertain suspicions not only with regard to the respectability of Mrs. Brace's establishment, but likewise concerning the good faith and sincerity of the milliner herself. The incidents of the preceding Sunday evening had opened the eyes of the young girl, artless and confiding as she was. The attempt of the guest, whom she only knew as Mr. Harley, to kiss her hand had shocked her for the moment; and the indignant glance which she threw upon him expressed all the dignity of her maidenhood smarting under an insult. But on retiring to her own chamber, the suspicion already engendered in her mind kindled into the worst fears; and her sleepless pillow was moistened with the orphan's bitter weeping. No wonder was it, then, that Mrs. Brace had since observed an alteration in her manner;—and now—on this Wednesday night on which we find her plunged in deep thought at that midnight hour, and in the solitude of her own room—she is deliberating what course she ought to pursue.

Alas! alas!—now is it that the poor girl experiences all the loneliness of her position in the world. Her parents have been snatched away from her: she has not a relative, to her knowledge, upon the face of the earth. Like the keen and cutting blast of December blowing upon the naked form of the shivering mendicant, comes the piercing and icy sense of her utter isolation to the heart of the young orphan girl.

In Mrs. Brace she had hoped to find a mother. Pure, innocent, unsuspicious, and confiding, she beheld a matronly kindness in the woman's manner which speedily won her naturally warm and inexperienced heart. The rigid decorum which *outwardly* reigned amongst the young ladies led her to regard *them* with a sisterly affection. She was therefore at first completely happy—or rather as happy as a maiden who had so recently lost her parents could possibly hope to be. But suddenly the film fell from her eyes—the veil was torn rudely away—and one little incident threw all her ideas and sentiments respecting the house and its inmates into another channel. Receiving as it were new intuitions, she now recognised the impropriety of Mrs. Brace's conduct in sending her with a note to Lord Florimel: and she remembered how intently the eyes of Mr. Harley were fixed upon her at supper on the Sunday evening. In spite of her purity—in spite of her artlessness—in spite of her ignorance on many matters, the maiden had obtained a glimmering of the truth; and the exercise of her reason soon developed her comprehensive faculties to an extent sufficient to produce the conviction that the milliner meditated anything rather than a mother's part towards her.

Behold her, then, seated in the solitude of her chamber and at this midnight hour, revolving in her imagination the best means of quitting Mrs. Brace's establishment as soon as possible. She did not like to reveal with abruptness the motive which prompted her to take so decisive a step; for she thought within herself that if her suspicions should happen to be unfounded in respect to the milliner, how grieved she would be at having proclaimed them. And yet she must make up her mind speedily—it was a matter admitting not of delay—and all timidity or hesitation must be conquered in order to accomplish a duty. Camilla, then, determined to quit the house on the ensuing morning: already had she acted with weakness in remaining there three whole days after the incident of Sunday evening!

Such were the thoughts occupying her imagination, when a sound, as if the handle of the door were turning, fell upon her ears.

She started from her seat—the door opened—and Mr. Harley stood before her!

A scream burst from the maiden's lips: then, the first feeling of terror passing away in a moment, the warm blood of indignation surged up to her cheeks—her brow—her very ears!

"Adorable girl," exclaimed the Prince, extending his arms towards her,—"look not thus angrily upon me! Blame not me—blame your beauty which possesses irresistible fascinations."

The temporary courage with which anger had armed the orphan, abandoned her suddenly as these words fell upon her ears with the effect of a shock; and sinking upon a seat, she burst into tears.

"My dearest Camilla," exclaimed the Prince, closing the door behind him,—"this is but a sorry reception which you give me. Hear me, my angel—hear me declare that I adore you—that I will never cease to love you—that I will do all I can to render you happy. Come—permit me to kiss away the tears from those beauteous eyes——"

"Begone, sir!" ejaculated the maiden, a burning sense of outrage restoring to her the courage which she had lost. "Begone, sir!" she cried, starting from the chair and pointing towards the door.

"One word, Camilla—only one word!" said the Prince, quite prepared for this opposition to his desires.

"Not a syllable, sir!" was the response, delivered even in a stern tone.

"Nay—then you must hear me perforce," exclaimed his Royal Highness, leaning his back against the door.

Camilla, astonished at this hardihood—for she could scarcely have believed that any man would have been guilty of such cowardly brutality towards a defenceless female—gazed upon the Prince with a stupefaction which, coming suddenly upon her, struck her speechless and motionless.

"My dear girl," resumed the Prince, hastily taking advantage of the pause, "you must be made to understand how matters exist between us. The truth is, then, that you are ravishingly beautiful, and I am desperately enamoured of you: you are at present nothing but a poor seamstress, and I will elevate you into a fine lady: instead of plying the needle all day, you shall ride in a carriage—have servants to wait upon you—and dwell in a nice house of your own. All this will I do for you, Camilla—if you only consent to my wishes. And if not, then shall I compel your stubborn virtue to surrender: for your strength against mine will be as that of the infant child in the grasp of a giant—and to your screams no succouring voice will respond."

His Royal Highness paused in the expectation that Miss Morton would vouchsafe some reply: but though her lips were apart, yet they did not even quiver as if about to speak—a spell seemed to hold her tongue in thraldom. And, with eyes that almost glared wildly, did she continue to gaze upon the countenance of him who had thus deliberately made known to her his fiendish resolves: but her manner—her air—her looks were those of a young creature on whom a tremendous consternation has fallen, paralyzing every organ—stupefying every sense—retaining every faculty in abeyance.

Gloatingly over her slight but exquisitely modelled figure, wandered the eyes of the Prince; and although the body of her dress was so modestly fashioned, that not even a glimpse could be obtained of her bosom, yet did the shape of the closely-fitting corsage afford an external indication of the firmness and roundness of those globes which imagination could not err in depicting of snowy whiteness.

"Sweetest—dearest—loveliest girl," exclaimed the Prince, maddened with desire, as he glanced from Camilla's fascinating form to the bed which stood near,—"delay not in rendering me completely happy—and my life shall be devoted to your service!"

At that instant the girl awoke as it were from the stupefaction of a dream to complete consciousness—and with the vividness of lightning did a thought strike her.

"Mr. Harley," she said, forcing herself even to smile faintly, "you expect too easy a conquest—and you will not value it."

"Oh! this is indeed an unexpected bliss—to hear you talk thus—to find that you do not repulse me any longer!" exclaimed the Prince, intoxicated with delight. "Camilla—sweetest Camilla——"

"If you really love me, Mr. Harley," said the young girl, bending down her looks, while her cheeks became flushed with the deepest crimson,—"you will retire immediately—and to-morrow I shall be happy to listen to you——"

"No—no—we cannot separate thus, dear creature!" ejaculated his Royal Highness. "I beseech you—I implore you to render me completely happy this night——"

"Leave me, then, for half-an-hour—twenty minutes—or even ten minutes," interrupted Camilla, speaking in a low tone but with rapid utterance. "Have pity upon my shame—my confusion——"

"Yes—for ten minutes will I leave you, sweetest girl," said the Prince, imagining that she did not choose to lay aside her apparel in his presence. "One kiss first—only one kiss as a foretaste of the indescribable joys——"

"No—not now—not now!" cried the orphan hysterically, as he approached her with outstretched arms. "If I must surrender myself to you, let it be in total obscurity—utter darkness——"

"It shall be as you desire," exclaimed the Prince, sweeping his eyes around the small but neatly-furnished chamber to assure himself that there was no second door by which the beauteous bird might take wing into a place of security: then, satisfied that escape was impossible and that she was completely in his power, he said, "Ten minutes only, my angel—ten minutes of mortal delay—and at the expiration of the interval, I shall return to find you ready to clasp me in your arms."

And glancing significantly towards the couch, he quitted the room, retiring into the ante-chamber.

The moment he had crossed the threshold, Camilla locked the door behind him and extinguished the light.

Then, without an instant's delay, the heroic girl noiselessly but speedily commenced the execution of the plan which had struck her as the only alternative to be adopted for the purpose of rescuing herself from the power of a man so resolutely bent upon sacrificing her to his brutal passions.

Armed with a desperate courage—that courage which could alone have prompted her pure soul to have recourse to the stratagem of appearing to yield to the villain's wishes in order to induce him to quit the room—Camilla Morton addressed herself to the task which she had in hand. Stripping the sheets from the bed, she rolled them up in a suitable manner and fastened them together; then she took the scissors which were suspended to a riband beneath her apron, and in a few minutes the bed-curtains were cut down. The window-drapery was next called into requisition; and with all these materials, Camilla speedily made a long, stout, and efficient rope.

The ten minutes had now expired—and the Prince knocked impatiently at the door. But so lightly had the young girl moved about the room—so cautiously had she conducted her operations—so skilfully had she hushed even the sounds of the scissors, that the heir-apparent entertained not the slightest suspicion of her design or the faintest idea of her proceedings. His desires—heightened by the gloating revels of his own sensual imagination—alone rendered him impatient: for he pictured to himself the sweet virgin charms, which he conceived to be by this time divested of their apparel, in readiness to be offered up as a rich banquet to his salacious appetite.

Impatiently, then, did he knock at the door; and the sweet voice of the orphan murmured from the other side, "Only another minute, Mr. Harley, and you may enter!"

The Prince was in raptures: he already felt as if

he were standing upon the threshold of paradise. But—Ah! all in a moment a sound as of a window opening met his ears. With suspended breath he listened: yes—it was a window being lifted up—and within that room too! Holy God! what did it mean? — could the young girl be meditating suicide?

Horrified by the thought, his Royal Highness burst the door open. There was no light in the room;—of *that* he was already aware, since he had vainly applied his eyes to the key-hole on quitting the chamber for the prescribed ten minutes. But the moon shone brightly into the room through the open casement.

A cry of horror burst from the lips of the Prince as the truth became suddenly revealed to him. Springing to the window, he looked forth—and his brain reeled with horror as he beheld the orphan descending from that dizzy height of two storeys into what appeared, as he glanced down, to be a dark abyss below.

A sensation of sickness seized upon him—a vertigo sprang whirlingly up in his head—he clapped his hand to his brow, and, staggering back, would have fallen on the floor had he not leant against the table which had been drawn up close to the window in order that the rope might be fastened to one of its legs.

Recovering himself almost immediately, the Prince looked forth again—and his eyes met the upturned countenance of the orphan girl as she paused to rest her light feet for a single instant on the projecting wood-work overhanging the front-door. The moon shone as though all its effulgence were poured upon the face of Camilla—that beauteous face on every lineament of which was depicted the noble heroism of a virgin resolute in saving her honour or perishing in the attempt.

"Camilla—sweet Camilla—dearest Camilla," murmured the Prince in a tone of almost anguished entreaty, as the rapid glance which he threw around the Square showed him that no one was nigh to behold this tremendous scene: "remain there, I implore you, until I come down to receive you in my arms!"

But, darting up at him a look full of indescribable contempt and scorn—for the disposition of the brave girl was too noble to harbour hatred—she once more trusted her light aerial form to the rope, and glided in safety upon the pavement of St. James's Square.

The Prince of Wales beheld the issue of the heroic deed, and then breathed more freely—for the danger that the orphan would be dashed to pieces and her death traced to his persecution of her, had suddenly passed away. Considerably relieved in one sense, but bitterly disappointed and chagrined in another, he hastily drew up the rope and closed the window: then, after a few moments' deliberation with himself whether he should arouse Mrs. Brace to acquaint her with what had occurred, or whether he should return to Carlton House and send her a note with full particulars in the morning, he decided upon the latter course. For he remembered that the amorous milliner had some little intrigue of her own in progress; and he therefore thought it better not to disturb her.

He was turning away from the chamber whence Camilla Morton had so strangely and desperately escaped, when something white upon the carpet attracted his notice; and as the object resembled a letter, he picked it up. And a letter it was—doubtless dropped accidentally by the maiden in the hurry of what may be almost literally termed her precipitate flight.

Curiosity prompted the Prince of Wales to examine the note by the light of the moon, which was shining so powerfully that it made the atmosphere resemble a halo of transparent quicksilver: but the instant that his eyes fell on the address of that letter he started as if a viper had suddenly bitten him.

The letter dropped from his hand—and this incident appeared to recall him to himself. Picking it up again, he thrust it into his breast—and then quitted the apartment with a gloom upon his countenance darker than the obscurity of the antechamber which he traversed or of the corridor into which he thence passed.

Groping his way to the staircase, the Prince of Wales lost no time in departing from a house where in addition to being thoroughly baffled by Camilla's heroic flight, he had just received a severe shock from the glimpse which he had caught of the address on the outside of the letter.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

ANOTHER INCIDENT OF THE SAME NIGHT.

THE reader will not require to be told that it was no ordinary amount of courage which had sustained Camilla Morton throughout the desperate proceeding which she adopted to save her honour from the libidinous profligate by whom it was menaced. But the instant she touched the pavement with her feet—the moment that her safety was assured and the tremendous gulf passed—a powerful reaction took place in her mind, and she burst into a flood of tears. Her limbs suddenly appeared to fail her—and scarcely had she dragged herself round the corner of the adjacent street leading from St. James's Square into Pall Mall, when she was compelled to lean against some railings for support.

At this moment a man and a woman passed that way: but beholding a genteelly-dressed young girl without bonnet, cloak, or scarf, and apparently convulsed with grief, they stopped and spoke to her.

"What ails you, Miss?" inquired the woman, assuming as pleasing and mild a tone of voice as possible—which was not very difficult, by the bye, inasmuch as her tones were naturally far from disagreeable.

Camilla raised her eyes the moment those words, pronounced by one of her own sex, met her ears; and, encountering the pale but rather pretty face of a young woman who looked kindly upon her, she became animated with hope and confidence.

"I have just escaped from the power of some one who menaced me with violence and outrage," she said, in a hasty and excited tone; "and I implore you to see me to a place of safety. I have but little money about me at this moment: but I possess ample means of procuring funds to-morrow——"

"Well, you take the young lady along with you," said the man; "and I'll just go about the little business I have in hand."

Camilla started at the roughness of the voice which thus sounded on her ears and which formed so disagreeable a contrast with that of the woman:

nor was she reassured when, on glancing at the man's countenance, she observed it was villainous-looking in the extreme.

The woman instantaneously perceived the effect thus produced upon the young lady, and hastened to exclaim, "My husband is a rough diamond, Miss—but he is a true one for all that. A more generous-hearted man never broke bread, I can assure you!"

"And I wouldn't injure a fly, Miss," added the man, concealing behind his back the huge club which he held in one hand, and thrusting down with the other the butt-end of a pistol that peeped out of his pocket. "But I'll leave you to my missus, young lady—and she'll take as much care of you as if she was your own natural parent."

Thus speaking, the man made a sort of bow, and hurried away.

"Come, Miss—and I will take you to my lodging which isn't very far off," said the woman. "My husband is a cattle-driver, you must know, and is going to drive some beasts to Smithfield Market presently. That's why we are out so late—or rather so early in the morning. I was going with him: but now I shall have more pleasure in placing you in safety."

The woman spoke with such an air of candour, honesty, and sincerity that she succeeded in removing from Camilla's mind the disagreeable impression which the sinister countenance, rough voice, and coarse manners of her companion had made upon it: and the young lady, therefore, no longer hesitated to accompany her. But before they moved away from the spot, the woman took off her cloak and insisted that Camilla should wrap herself up in it; and as the garment had a hood to it, the maiden was thoroughly protected from the cold.

This proof of kindness won Camilla's entire confidence; and away she sped with her new friend.

* * * * * * *

We must now return once more to the interior of Mrs. Brace's house.

It was nearly one o'clock—twenty minutes had elapsed since the flight of Camilla and the departure of the Prince—and the milliner slept soundly, little dreaming what momentous incidents had taken place beneath her roof that night.

A light burnt upon the toilette-table in her bed-chamber; and the embers of a fire were smouldering in the grate.

The curtains were drawn completely round the couch, whence came the slow and steady respiration of *two* persons: for, in plain truth, the milliner was sleeping in the arms of a lover.

Who he was matters not at present.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning, we said—and a profound silence reigned throughout the establishment.

But suddenly this solemn stillness was broken by some one stumbling on the stairs; and Mrs. Brace started up in alarm. Her companion slept on, undisturbed by the sound—and she did not choose to awake him: for it struck her at the instant that the noise which had aroused her must be caused by the Prince of Wales who, in spite of the injunction she had given him, was groping his way to her chamber. Such was Mrs. Brace's impression.

She listened as she sate up in the bed—and now, distinctly as she could count the beating of her palpitating heart, did she hear footsteps stealthily approach the door.

Convinced that it was his Royal Highness who, having no doubt failed in his attempt elsewhere, was resolved to share her couch,—and angry to think that she could not be allowed to enjoy her own amour in tranquillity and privacy,—Mrs. Brace got up—opened the door—and immediately found herself face to face with an individual who unceremoniously advanced into the chamber.

The light from the toilette-table fell upon his countenance—and, to her unspeakable horror, she recognised the Magsman, her husband!

"Well, my love, I come to see you at all hours, you observe," he said, chucking her under the chin.

"What in the name of heaven do you want now?" demanded the wretched woman, impetuously dashing down his hand with her own. "If it be money, name the sum and the place whither it is to be sent—but leave me this moment!" she added, frightened almost to death lest her lover should awake.

"Now, don't be flurried, my love," said the Magsman, with the most provoking coolness: "for you know very well that I am of rather an obstinate disposition; and therefore the more impatient you are to get rid of me, the longer will be my visit. But I don't hesitate to set your mind at ease on one thing—which is that I'm not in any particular want of blunt at this moment."

"Then what do you require?" demanded Mrs. Brace, not daring to look towards the bed for fear the ruffian should suspect she had a companion there and should treat him with as little ceremony but in as extortionate a manner as he did the Prince of Wales on that evening when his Royal Highness was concealed behind the curtain in the milliner's parlour.

"What do I require?" repeated Joe Warren: "why—it will take me a few minutes to describe——"

"Then why not come to-morrow evening—or write to me?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, grasping at the hope that the suggestions would prove satisfactory and induce him to leave her.

"You're a fool, Fanny," returned the Magsman, incoolingly. "How the devil do you suppose that I can go walking about London of an evening, after escaping out of Newgate and having no end of rewards offered for my apprehension? No—no, old gal—that won't do, I can tell you. The middle of the night is the time for me—until I get a free pardon."

"A free pardon!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, who was standing all this while in her night-dress and shivering alike with cold and apprehension. "You cannot dream of such a thing! Who is to obtain a free pardon for *you*?"

"Yourself, my dear," responded the Magsman: "and it was to consult you thereupon that I paid you this visit to-night."

"*I* obtain you a free pardon!—consult *me*!" exclaimed the amazed and bewildered milliner; "you must either be mad or joking—and surely this is not the hour to make a jest of people."

"By Satan! it is no jest, I can tell you!" ejaculated Warren. "Come, listen attentively for a few minutes, and our business can be soon settled. I'm sorry to keep you standing in the cold, my love," added the fellow, with a leer: "but unless you like to return to your bed and admit me——

"Go on—go on," cried Mrs. Brace, petulantly: "what have you to say? I am all attention. Speak!"

"Well—you know, in the first place, that there's no end of charges against me, and ever so many rewards offered for my apprehension," resumed the Magsman; "and you have no doubt guessed before this that I had a hand in upsetting the Government van into the Devil's Punchbowl and letting loose the convicts. But it wasn't out of any love for the whole lot of them, but merely to restore my friends the Big Beggarman and Briggs to freedom. Well, such a complication of things hanging over my head, makes it unpleasant—very unpleasant, I can assure you, my dear: and my two friends that I have just named to you—one of whom, the Beggarman, had the honour of paying his respects to you at this house one night——"

"Cease this bantering tone—and speak seriously and to the point," said the milliner, sharply: and all this while she wondered how it was that her lover had not awakened—or, if he were aroused, how he could remain so silent in the presence of such a strange scene.

"I'm coming to the point as quick as I can," said the Magsman. "In fact, I was just going to tell you that my two friends, the Beggarman and Briggs, feel themselves as much put out as I do by having to play at hide-and-seek about London, and not being able to go back to our usual haunts. And then there's Lizzy Marks—my young woman, you know, who called upon you about the Newgate affair—she doesn't feel herself quite comfortable either: for the runners are looking after her as well as me and my other two pals. And therefore we have all come to a determination to get a free pardon; and if that can't be done, we shall be satisfied if the Home Secretary will withdraw the offers of reward for our capture, and just give the Bow Street functionaries a hint to look another way when they chance to see any of us coming along."

"You must be mad to think that I have the means of performing one-hundredth part of all this!" cried Mrs. Brace, who had listened with poignant impatience to her husband's explanations. "I know what you mean—I understand whose assistance you fancy that I can obtain in your behalf——"

"And by heaven! *he* shall assist!" ejaculated the Magsman, ferociously. "Come—write me a certificate, or acknowledgment, or whatever you may choose to call it, in precisely the terms which I shall dictate; and then I'll try whether I can't make his Royal Highness——"

"Hush! the very walls have ears," said the milliner, in an imploring tone. "What do you require me to write?"

"An acknowledgment that you are the Prince's mistress," answered the Magsman.

"Silence! — begone!" almost screamed the wretched woman, driven to despair.

"Damnation! do you dare me outright?" exclaimed the Magsman, in a ferocious tone: then, drawing a pistol from his pocket, he said, "By Satan! you shall do as I command you—or——"

"Mercy! mercy!" moaned the milliner, falling upon her knees and clasping her hands with an air of passionate entreaty.

"Don't be a fool and no harm will happen to you," said the Magsman. "I don't want your life—it's no use to me: but I will have what I ask for—a written acknowledgment that you've been unfaithful to me, your lawful husband—and that his Royal Highness——"

"Be silent, I command—I implore—I beseech you!" cried Mrs. Brace, in a tone of stifling agony.

"Then give me the paper—get up from your knees and write it at once——"

"No—never—never!" exclaimed the milliner. "You are mad to ask it—you must kill me first——"

"By Satan! I will too," interrupted the Magsman ferociously, as he presented the pistol at his wife.

A shriek burst from the lips of the affrighted woman: but at the same instant—quick as the eye can wink—a man sprang from behind the curtain of the bed—dashed the pistol from the ruffian's hand—and, bounding past him towards the toilette-table, extinguished the light.

All this was the work of a moment, and the room was suddenly involved in total darkness. Indeed, with such rapidity was the whole proceeding accomplished that the Magsman did not even catch the faintest glimpse of the countenance of the individual who had so abruptly and unexpectedly emerged from the bed.

Fortunately the pistol did not explode—or serious injury, if not death, might have been the result.

"Villain! attempt no violence—or, by heaven! it shall be a struggle of life and death between us," exclaimed a firm, decided, and manly voice the instant that darkness fell upon the scene.

With a savage growl the Magsman stooped to pick up his pistol: but it was snatched away from him at the very moment that his hand touched it—Mrs. Brace's unknown lover having simultaneously sought for the weapon. A terrible imprecation burst from the lips of Joe Warren, as through the intense darkness he aimed a blow with his bludgeon which would have told with murderous effect had it reached him for whom it was intended. But the unknown had already stepped aside—the next instant the Magsman was tripped up—and Mrs. Brace, throwing up the window, was on the point of screaming for assistance, when the villain, seeing that his position had suddenly become alarming, exclaimed, "Silence, Fanny! don't raise the neighbourhood, and I'll take myself off at once."

"Begone, then!" said the unknown individual, releasing the ruffian from the strong grasp which he had laid upon him the moment that he had tripped him up.

The Magsman rose and beat a hasty retreat without uttering another word: not that he was afraid to struggle with his unknown and unseen foe even unto the very death,—but because he was well aware that if a disturbance were created in the house, it would probably end in his arrest—and he had presence of mind enough to recollect that although he had escaped once out of Newgate, he could not hope to perform the same feat a second time.

"Get you back to bed, Fanny," said the unknown; "while I just slip on some clothing and assure myself that the fellow leaves the house."

"For God's sake, beware of him, my lord," murmured the milliner; "or he will do your lordship a mischief."

"Fear nothing," was the response: and the nobleman—for such he was—stole from the room.

And now a most extraordinary incident crowned

the adventure which we are relating. For the nobleman, gliding hastily down the stairs in the pitchy darkness which prevailed, overtook the Magsman near the bottom; and laying his hand upon the villain's shoulder, he said, in a low but impressive whisper, "One word with you, my friend!"

"Well—what now?" demanded the Magsman, in a voice scarcely even as agreeable as the growl of a tiger roused from its nap by the stick of the menagerie-keeper. "If you mean mischief——"

"I mean nothing of the kind," was the curt and decisive interruption. "On the contrary, you are just the very sort of man for whom I have been seeking these months past—and I am delighted that accident should have thrown such a desperate fellow as you are in my way."

"Then why did you interfere with me up-stairs?" demanded the Magsman gruffly, and more than half-inclined to immolate—or attempt the immolation of—the unknown with his club.

"Because," replied the nobleman unhesitatingly, "in the first place it was necessary, to protect a female from violence—even though that female be, as I understand from what passed, your own lawful wife: secondly, because it was equally necessary to prevent you from creating a disturbance calculated to alarm the household and expose the fact of *my* presence in Mrs. Brace's bed-room;—and thirdly, because I can put you in the way of earning a sum of money which shall be ample enough to render you independent for the rest of your days in a foreign land."

"This last reason is one which I understand best of all," said the Magsman. "But are you in earnest?—or do you meditate some plant to entrap me?"

"Fool!" ejaculated the nobleman, contemptuously: "do you take me for a Bow Street runner?"

"I don't know what the devil to take you for," retoined the Magsman.

"Nor do I intend to enlighten you," said the nobleman. "But although you could not see me in the bed-room just now, I had a good view of your precious countenance from behind the curtain—and if I were an artist, I could paint it from memory to-morrow, to the very life."

"You're complimentary, at any rate," observed Warren, laconically. "But about this business you hinted at——"

"We cannot discuss it now: nor must your wife up-stairs—no, nor a living soul, save with my consent, become cognizant of what may pass between you and me on another occasion. You know the road in Hyde Park that runs along the border of Kensington Gardens?"

"I do. What next?" demanded the Magsman.

"Amuse yourself with a stroll up and down that road next Sunday evening, from nine to ten o'clock," said the nobleman; "mind and be alone. You will then know more."

"I shall not fail you," answered Warren: "for this looks like business."

"It will prove a lucrative one to you, my good friend," responded the nobleman. "But you must now be off as quickly as possible—and I shall see you as far as the front door."

The Magsman moved on in obedience to this hint; and fruitlessly did he strain his eyes to penetrate the darkness and catch a glimpse of the unknown's countenance. The obscurity was impervious; and on groping their way into the shop, the nobleman threw a silk handkerchief over his head so that when the door should be opened, the rays of the moon might not stream upon his features.

This precaution therefore baffled the last chance which the Magsman had of obtaining some idea of the personal appearance of the singular individual who from having been a resolute foe promised to become a generous patron.

"Good night," said Warren, as he crossed the threshold into Pall Mall: "or rather good morning."

"Here—take your pistol," whispered the nobleman, placing the weapon in his hand.

The Magsman muttered a word of thanks—thrust the pistol into his pocket—and took his departure at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

THE ORPHAN.

We have already, in a previous chapter of this narrative, glanced at the maze of vile and crowded streets lying in the immediate vicinity of Westminster Abbey: and it was into this morass of brick and mortar, swarming with human reptiles, that Camilla was led by the woman who had manifested so much apparent interest in her behalf.

During the walk from the vicinage of St. James's Square, Camilla had ingenuously and frankly confided to the woman enough of her history to show that she was an orphan—that she had a few hundred pounds standing in her own name at the Bank of England—and that she had been compelled, even at so late an hour in the night, to flee precipitately from an establishment in which she had been engaged but where she had suddenly encountered treatment of the most dishonourable kind. She did not however mention the name of Mrs. Brace—nor did she explain the manner in which she had escaped from her house: a lingering sentiment of delicacy and forbearance rendered her silent on the former point—and she imagined that she should not be believed were she to enter into details respecting the latter.

The woman expressed the deepest sympathy on Camilla's behalf—declaring that it was fortunate the young lady had fallen in with her, as she would take the greatest care of her until she had decided what course to adopt—and concluding with a strong eulogy on her husband whom she represented to be "the most kind-hearted of men, although his occupation of a drover had somewhat marred his good looks by exposing him to all weathers and leaving him little leisure to attend to his personal appearance."

In fact, the woman spoke with an air of so much sincerity that Camilla not only placed implicit confidence in her, but was even angry with herself for having allowed the sinister countenance of her husband to produce a disagreeable impression on her mind or excite a momentary suspicion.

Nevertheless, when the woman led the way into that maze of sombre-looking streets, the sudden plunge as it were from the glorious moonlight into the obscurity of narrow lanes and the positive darkness of vile alleys, produced the effect of a shock upon the young girl; and, catching her companion by the arm, she said in a tremulous tone, "Whither are we going?"

"To my lodgings, which are close by," was the answer, delivered in so calm and collected a voice and with such a reassuring manner that Camilla felt ashamed of her terror. "Poor people, my dear young lady, are obliged to dwell in strange-looking neighbourhoods," added the woman.

"Alas! that is too true," murmured the orphan, as she continued her way by her companion's side.

In a few minutes the woman stopped in one of the sombre streets—opened a door with a latch-key—and said, "This is my abode, Miss: it is humble—but you are welcome."

Camilla's heart sank within her at the appearance of the place; and yet the woman's words and manner were kind, honest, and reassuring. Overcoming her scruples, therefore, by a desperate effort, and exerting all her power to stifle the suspicions that again sprang up in her bosom, the young lady crossed the threshold—plunging as it were into the most pitchy darkness.

The woman shut the door, and requested Camilla to wait one moment in the passage while she entered an adjacent room to procure a light. The half minute which now elapsed seemed to the maiden a perfect age; and her apprehensions increased to such an extent and with such rapidity that they rose into ideas of horror developing themselves in ghastly numbers But suddenly a light gleamed forth from the open door of the room—the woman re-appeared, with a candle in her hand—and the look which Camilla threw upon her encountered so much placidity of expression on her pale and interesting features, that again were her fears dissipated in an instant, and again was she bitterly vexed with herself for entertaining suspicions which were most probably injurious in the extreme to the female who was affording her a generous hospitality.

The candle revealed a small narrow passage with dingy walls and a staircase at the extremity; and up this flight the woman led the way, Camilla now following her with renewed confidence. A small bar

sleanly bed-chamber on the first floor received them; and the woman intimated that it was here the young lady was to sleep. She again apologised for the humility of the accommodation, but again likewise affirmed an assurance of the most cordial welcome. Camilla expressed her thanks for the kindness demonstrated towards her—and the woman, placing the candle upon a little table, withdrew.

Carefully locking the door, the orphan hastened to lay aside her clothing—for she was overwhelmed with fatigue; and soon after she had laid her head upon the pillow slumber sealed her eyes.

She awoke in the morning just as the clock of Westminster Abbey was striking nine; and when the sunbeams shone upon her eyes and she found herself safe in that homely room but cleanly bed, she again reproached herself for having thought ill of the couple to whom she was indebted for the hospitality she had enjoyed.

Rising from the humble pallet, Camilla performed her toilette: but, during the operation, tears more than once trickled down her cheeks as she thought of the really comfortable home from which she had been compelled to fly, and of the necessity of finding another.

Another home! Alas — alas! 'tis much more easily said than done: and the orphan felt that it was so—and her heart, as it were, came up into her throat as she reflected that the *only* true home which she had ever enjoyed had been swallowed up in the grave of her parents!

O God! robbery is bad—forgery is vile—rape is atrocious—and murder is abhorrent: but to ill-treat the orphan—to be merciless towards the poor being from whom Death has borne away the fond mother and doting father, never to send them back again,—Oh! this is abhorrent also—and the wretch who has no pity for the orphan, is capable of robbery, and forgery, and rape, and murder!

Scarcely was Camilla's toilette performed, when some one tapped gently at the door. She opened it—and the woman made her appearance with many anxious inquiries as to how the young lady had slept. This apparently kind solicitude on her behalf having been duly acknowledged by Camilla, the woman led the way to a small but neatly furnished parlour down stairs, where breakfast was ready arranged upon the table.

The woman's husband was there, and his appearance had undergone considerable improvement. For he had shaven the beard of several days' growth which enhanced the sinister expression of his countenance when Camilla first beheld him a few hours back—his hair, then matted, was now combed out and neatly arranged—his soiled shirt had been exchanged for clean linen—and he wore a decent suit of black clothes.

"I hope my missus has made you comfortable, young lady?" said the man, assuming as gentle a tone as his voice could possibly modulate itself to.

"I have to return you both my sincerest thanks for your kindness," answered Camilla.

"Oh! don't say a word about that, Miss," exclaimed the man. "We only performed a Christian duty; and I'm sure that even a heart of stone would have melted to see such a nice young lady as you are in any sort of trouble and distress. Why, when I returned home about an hour after you and my missus, I found her a-crying as if her eyes had turned into water-spouts——"

"Well, well," interrupted the woman—but not petulantly;—"I must confess that I was affected by all the dear young lady had been telling me as we walked along. For it's such a shocking thing to have lost one's parents at so tender an age—— But come, dear Miss," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself—for she saw that Camilla had become painfully affected: "dry your tears—don't take on so, there's a sweet girl—and anything that me or my husband can do to assist you, we will perform cheerfully. Come—sit down—and try a cup of tea: it will do you good, Miss."

Camilla hastily wiped her eyes, and, yielding to the woman's entreaties, took a seat at the table. Her heart was however too full to allow her to experience the slightest appetite: but she forced herself to eat a mouthful for fear her entertainers should think that she was dainty and disliked the homely fare set before her. When the meal was over, the man rose from his seat, observing that he had some particular business to transact in the City, but that he should be back by dinner-time.

"The City!" exclaimed his wife. "Are you going into the City the first thing this morning? Well, that is singular——"

"Singular, my dear—how so?" demanded the man, who spoke in very affectionate terms to his wife.

"Because this young lady has some little business to transact in the City, I think. Didn't you say so, Miss?" inquired the woman, turning towards Camilla.

"I must indeed replenish my purse," responded the orphan, with a profound sigh,—"since I have been compelled to leave my situation. Having lost one home, the sooner I settle myself in another the better."

"Then I suppose, Miss, that you've got relations, or trustees, or lawyers, or something of the sort in the City," said the man; "and you want to call upon them. In that case, I shall be very happy to see you safe to their house," he added, with an apparent frankness which quite made the orphan forget the sinister expression of his countenance.

"Alas! I have no relatives—no friends," she returned, hastily wiping away the tears that started forth upon her long lashes. "But, Oh!—I was wrong to say that I had no friends!" she exclaimed, a sudden reminiscence striking her and bringing a tint of animation to her pale cheeks. "Yes — Mr Meagles—he will advise me how to act——"

"You'd better write a note to your friend, Miss," said the man, exchanging a rapid but significant glance with the woman: "and I will take it to him at once for you. It 'll be much better than for you to go running about the streets——"

"Thank you—thank you!" exclaimed Camilla, grateful for the suggestion and the offer which accompanied it. "But it is not necessary for me to write—indeed, my brain is so bewildered that my very sight is dazzled—and I could not pen a single line. My object will be however accomplished if you will have the goodness to call on Mr. Meagles in Jermyn Street;"—and she mentioned the number of Mrs. Pigglebarry's house. "You can tell him that incidents of a most unpleasant nature have occurred, compelling me to leave the establishment in which I held a situation—and that if he will favour me with an immediate visit, his advice will be most thankfully received."

"Your commission, Miss, shall be executed without a moment's unnecessary delay," responded the man, who immediately quitted the house.

Ten minutes elapsed before it struck Camilla that she had forgotten to communicate her name to the individual who had thus undertaken to convey her message to Meagles; and she almost felt surprised and annoyed that the man himself had not asked the question. She however consoled herself with the reflection that Meagles would be certain to guess who it was that thus sent for him—and if not, the description which the messenger would give of her personal appearance could not fail to recall her to his recollection.

At the expiration of an hour the man returned, wearing a mournful expression of countenance; and Camilla instantly perceived that something was wrong.

"Mr. Meagles isn't at home, Miss," he said; "and I regret to inform you that he won't return for the next six weeks. He's gone to Scotland, it appears, on very particular business — for the Prince of Wales, I think the woman of the house told me——"

"Yes—most probably," murmured poor Camilla, in a stifling tone: "I know that he *is* very frequently employed in transacting the business of his Royal Highness."

"Well, cheer up, Miss—don't take on about it," said the man. "You're quite welcome to stay here, you know, till your friend returns: and as for money—I'm sure neither me or my missus will ever ask you for a farthing——"

"The young lady is not without funds," observed the woman, as if giving a piece of information to her husband.

"Oh! well—I'm glad of that for her sake, poor dear!" exclaimed the latter. "But how could I know it unless you told me, my love?" he added, in a tone of bland and gentle remonstrance to his wife.

"My good friends," suddenly exclaimed Camilla, after a few moments' deep thought; "my mind is made up how to act. It is true that I possess a few hundreds of pounds in the Bank of England, which sum I had hoped to leave there to accumulate while I subsisted by the earnings of my needle. I am determined not to seek for another situation: but I will hire and furnish a neat lodging in a respectable neighbourhood and endeavour to form a connexion as a dress-maker. For this purpose I propose to repair to the City—inquire for some respectable solicitor or stock-broker——"

"If you want a lawyer, Miss," interrupted the woman, "my husband's attorney is one in whom you can place implicit trust. Ah! we were better off ourselves once, Miss, I can assure you—and then we had our regular professional adviser, who has stuck like a friend to us ever since."

"He has indeed!" ejaculated the man. "There isn't a better fellow in the world than Samuel Simmonds, Esquire—though I say it. And what is more extraordinary still, I've got an appointment with him this forenoon——"

"I shall be thankful," said Camilla, "if you will allow me to accompany you to Mr. Simmonds' office."

"Well—I have got to call at several places first," remarked the man: "but my missus shall go with you into the City presently—and I'll meet you both in Tokenhouse Yard at twelve o'clock precisely."

With this understanding, to which the orphan thankfully assented, he took his departure.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE ORPHAN'S FRIENDS.

Precisely as the clock of the Royal Exchange was striking mid-day, Camilla Morton and the woman alighted from a hackney-coach in Lothbury, whence they passed into Tokenhouse Yard, which is a blind alley the houses whereof are chiefly let out as offices and business-premises.

With the little money which Camilla had in her possession when she fled from Mrs. Bruce's house on the preceding night, she had purchased a bonnet and scarf; and the excitement of having her mind now actively employed had brought back the colour to her cheeks. Her appearance was therefore ladylike, pleasing, and interesting—and, as the woman kept close behind her, it seemed as if a genteel young person was walking out attended by her servant.

Scarcely had they entered Tokenhouse Yard when the woman exclaimed, "How fortunate! Here comes my husband with the lawyer!"

And Camilla, raising her eyes, beheld the man advancing in company with a short, stout, red-faced, but respectable-looking individual, dressed in black, and who was immediately introduced to Miss Morton as Mr. Samuel Simmonds.

"Highly honoured to make your acquaintance, Miss," said the attorney. "What can I do for you in the way of business? But had we not better walk back to my offices?" he demanded, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the farther extremity of Tokenhouse Yard.

"I don't think it's necessary, sir," suggested the man. "This young lady only wants to sell out a few pounds——"

"Indeed! Oh! well—it happens that I am just going over to the Bank to meet my broker, who is to sell out twenty thousand for a certain noble lord—my best client in fact," observed Mr. Samuel Simmonds, assuming a confidential tone and air, as if he would not tell everybody that the nameless peer was his most generous patron. "Well, Miss—and how much do you propose to sell out?—and what's the stock? Be so kind as to tell me all about it, Miss—and your business shall be done in a jiffey—ahem! I mean in a moment."

Camilla, taking the abruptness of the lawyer's manner for the off-handedness of business, drew from the bosom of her dress a Bank receipt; and presenting it to the attorney, she said, "This will give you all the necessary explanations, sir: and I am desirous to sell out a hundred pounds."

"Very well, Miss—a hundred pounds," repeated Mr. Samuel Simmonds. "Just be so kind as to step over to the Bank with me. Oh! you may come too—both of you, if you like," he added, turning with a patronising smile to the man and his wife.

The whole party accordingly crossed over the street to the Bank, and entered that court-yard which communicates with Lothbury.

"Step here one moment, Miss—stop here with the young lady, my good friends," said Mr. Samuel

Simmonds, in his off-hand, bustling, business-like style. "I must just step in and see whether my broker is there yet: or else," he observed, with a knowing wink, "non-professionals, you perceive, will not be allowed to enter this atmosphere which is redolent of cash."

And laughing heartily at some wit which he probably saw in the observation, Mr. Samuel Simmonds walked rapidly away—entering the building by a door at the extremity of the court, and carrying the Bank receipt in his hand with an air of as much indifference to its value as if it were a piece of waste paper as utterly worthless, for instance, as the leaf of the *Morning Post* that contains the leading articles.

"Clever fellow, that—very clever fellow!" observed the man, ostensibly addressing himself to his wife, but really for the purpose of impressing the idea which he enunciated on the mind of Miss Morton.

A feeling of uneasiness shot like a pang through the brain of the young lady when she beheld the lawyer depart in such an unceremonious manner with the document which constituted her title to the few hundred pounds that she had in the funds: but scarcely had she begun to reason within herself against the justice of her suspicion, when Mr. Simmonds re-appeared, holding the Bank receipt in his hand with the same air as before—as if it were a matter of perfect indifference whether he or his client kept it until it was wanted.

"My broker isn't come yet—and it's just as well that he should not have been here at the moment," said Mr. Samuel Simmonds, as he accosted the party. "The fact is, I find there's a new regulation issued since yesterday—and people selling out stock must be identified *to* the broker *at* his office first. So I tell you what must be done:—you, my good fellow," he continued, addressing himself to the man, "go with the young lady to my broker's—you know where he lives in Cateaton Street—and having identified her, make him come along with you at once. Tell him I'm waiting here about his lordship's twenty thousand pound affair as well as the young lady's business. Miss," he added, turning to Camilla,—"will you have the goodness to step as far as Cateaton Street with our good friend here?—and then the matter can be settled in a moment."

Camilla unhesitatingly complied with this request; and away she went in company with the man whose sinister countenance she had completely forgotten—so grateful did she feel towards him for all the trouble himself and his wife were taking in her behalf.

On emerging from the Bank of England, however, Camilla observed that her companion drew his hat, which had large slouching brims, very far over his countenance, and pulled the great shawl-handkerchief which he wore very high up; and as the weather was not particularly cold, the proceeding actually assumed in her eyes the appearance of a wish on the man's part to conceal his features. Again did suspicion shoot like a pang through the brain of the orphan; and the feeling was sympathetically felt like an ice-bolt in her heart. She cast another and more scrutinizing look upon his countenance: but all she could see of it were the eyes that gleamed with a sinister glare, and the nose peering over the shawl-handkerchief. Thus was he muffled up—and yet it was little more than noon—in the broad daylight—and with a crisp and healthy but by no means chilling atmosphere.

What could it mean? Had she fallen into vile hands?—should she rush back to the Bank of England where she had left the woman and the lawyer, and demand her receipt, or at least assure herself that it was all safe? Her blood literally curdled in her veins and she appeared to be walking on under the influence of a vertigo as she asked herself these questions. Still she obeyed not the suggestive impulse which her suspicions gave; and although every instant beheld those suspicions growing more poignant and intolerable, she had not the moral courage nor the resolution to turn abruptly and retrace her way to the Bank of England, because by so doing she should at once be letting the man see that she mistrusted him, his wife, and his attorney altogether. And then, if her suspicions *did* happen to be wrong, how sorry—how grieved—how distressed should she be to think that she had thus injuriously treated persons at whose hands she had received so much kindness!

While these conflicting thoughts, ideas, and inclinations swayed her mind, she still kept walking on by the side of the man; and at length, unable any longer to endure a state of suspense and uncertainty which became excruciating, she said, "I beg your pardon for putting such a question—but are you confident that Mr. Simmonds is completely trustworthy?"

"Trustyworthy!" ejaculated the man, speaking from behind the great shawl-handkerchief: "to be sure he is, Miss—or you don't suppose that I would have recommended him to you? Bless your heart alive, he's honesty itself!"

They were now in Cateaton Street, which is a very narrow thoroughfare; and at this moment a waggon so completely blocked up the way that there was only room for one person to pass at a time. The man allowed Camilla to proceed first; and the young lady went quickly on, in the hope of speedily reaching the stockbroker's office.

The waggon was cleared—and, turning round, she looked for her companion. But he was not to be seen! Her suspicions now became maddening, and she hurriedly retraced her way along the street. Still she could see nothing of him. With wild and affrighted looks, the orphan increased her pace, and in a few minutes arrived once more at the Bank of England.

Entering the court opening from Lothbury, a glance convinced her that the woman and the attorney had disappeared likewise. A sickening sensation came over the poor girl—her brain reeled—her eyes grew dim—her limbs gave way beneath her. But by a sudden and violent effort, she recalled her scattered ideas; and remembering that the lawyer's offices were represented to be situate in Tokenhouse Yard, she hastened thither with a speed which was now animated by despair. On every door and on the wall inside every passage opening from that blind alley, did she search for the name of Simmonds: but she found it not. At length, when the last house in the place was vainly inspected, the orphan staggered against a door-post and pressed her hand to her forehead in order to steady her brain—for she felt as if she were going mad!

But once more did she arouse herself from the influence of despair in order to woo back hope to her

bosom: for, Oh! to lose all that she possessed in the world was a blow which seemed of an atrocity too infernal for a good God to permit to fall upon the head of an orphan,—a blow which would strike her as with blasting, searing lightning, leaving naught save the blackest misery in her soul!

Holding her hand in momentary consideration to her heated, throbbing brow, she reflected that she might have misunderstood Mr. Simmonds—that his offices were not in Tokenhouse Yard—that he was perhaps still waiting for her, but in some other part of the Bank of England—and that an accident had separated her from the man who was leading her to the broker's place of business. These thoughts, rapidly suggesting themselves, appeared so feasible that she even endeavoured to smile at her own silliness in giving way to such harrowing suspicions: but, alas! the smile was sickly indeed, and the suspicions were relieved of little of their agonising poignancy.

Hastening back to the Bank of England, Camilla accosted the beadle who stood at the gate, and inquired whether he happened to be acquainted with an attorney of the name of Simmonds.

"I should rayther think you don't want to ax me such a question, young o'oman," was the gruff response which the lace-bedizened functionary gave, as he raised his staff slowly and let it fall suddenly with the butt-end on the pavement.

"You surely cannot understand my question," said Camilla, the tears starting into her eyes: "or you would at least answer me with the same civility that I exhibited towards you when putting it," she added, in a tone that trembled with emotions.

"All I know is that I see you and another o'oman pass the gate just now in company with that notorious feller Simmonds and a suspicious-looking man—and I kept a precious sharp eye on all four on yer," said the beadle. "So you'd better be off—'cos we don't want pickpockets and prostitutes lurking about here —— But, holloa! what's the matter now?" he ejaculated, perceiving that Camilla suddenly burst into a perfect agony of weeping "Come—tramp—be off with you!" he cried in a brutal tone and with savage manner. "This is a new dodge, I suppose—and you fancy that whimpering will make genelmen pull out their purses and empty 'em into yer hand. Come—be off, I say."

And, seising the wretched girl by the shoulders as she was leaning against the open door to support herself from falling, the beadle bundled her roughly into the street.

Three or four persons instantly stopped to witness the proceeding; and Camilla, overwhelmed with mingled shame and grief, fruitlessly endeavoured to utter a few words of explanation. The beadle made a sign that she was an impostress—the persons whom the scene had attracted, shook their heads and passed on, wondering how so young a creature could practise so much deception—and the Bank functionary of course obtained the credit of being a very vigilant and experienced officer who could detect a rogue or cheat under any disguise.

And the orphan dragged herself away from the spot, ten thousand times more poignantly wounded by the insult she had received than by the loss of all she possessed in the world: for that Simmonds was a notorious character was at least apparent from the words which had fallen from the beadle's lips.

For a few minutes the mental anguish which Camilla endured was so excruciating that it absorbed every other consideration; but suddenly recollecting that she was in a public place in the middle of a crowded city, and perceiving that her woe-begone aspect was attracting towards her the notice of every one who passed, she dried her eyes—drew her veil over her countenance—and walked mechanically on, without however heeding which way she was going. In this mood the poor creature made the complete circuit of the Bank; and she only became aware of the fact when suddenly startled by finding herself once more within a few yards of the beadle who had ere now so grossly ill-treated her.

Retaining her veil over her countenance, and summoning all her courage to her aid, she accosted the man who evidently did not recognise her again at the moment.

"Not many minutes have elapsed," she said, in a tone the collected firmness of which surprised even herself, "since you cruelly misjudged the character of a respectable young lady, to whom you likewise offered personal violence."

"Ah! and you're the young lady?" ejaculated the beadle, suddenly becoming alarmed lest he had indeed gone too far—for there was now something in her voice and manner which carried a conviction to the man's heart that she was *not* the loose and abandoned character he had so gratuitously represented her to be.

"Yes—I am the young lady," said Camilla: "and if you yourself are a father or a brother—if you have a sister or a grown-up daughter whom you love and respect—you ought to feel both sorry and ashamed that you have this day so grossly and unprovokedly insulted me."

The beadle now grew more frightened and began to stammer forth apologies—declaring that there were so many impostors now-a-days it was impossible to know who was honest and who was not—that the Bank especially was made the scene and the theatre of their pranks—and that he was obliged to be very particular or else he should lose his situation.

"All this is doubtless true enough," said Camilla; "but you ought to exercise greater caution. However, I freely forgive you for the ill-treatment which I experienced at your hands. And now tell me what you know of those people with whom you saw me ere now?"

"Respecting the young o'oman and the man with the shawl-handkerchief, I don't know nothink, Miss," answered the beadle, whose tone and manner had changed from the surly roughness of the bully to the cringing servility of a coward who is afraid of the consequences of his ruffianism: "leastways, I could only judge by their looks that they was rum customers. But that scoundrel Simmonds is always lurking about here ——"

"Then he is not an attorney, as he pretends?" said Camilla, her heart sinking within her and all the keen, agonising consciousness of utter misery again coming upon her, as the last lingering gleam of hope was now unmistakably destroyed.

"Well—he was a lawyer once, Miss," answered the beadle: "but he's been struck off the rolls long ago—and ever since he's hung about the Bank and 'Change——"

"Which is the way into the public room where persons sell money out of the funds?" demanded Camilla, in a stifling voice.

"Through that door, Miss," responded the func-

tionary, pointing with his staff in the direction indicated by his words.

Away sped the orphan into the establishment; and addressing herself to one of the numerous clerks whom she saw in the room that she thus entered, she put a few inquiries in a rapid and almost incoherent manner—for she was convulsed with an inward grief to which she dared not give vent, but which it cost her the most painful efforts to control. By the individual whom she thus accosted, Camilla was referred to another clerk; and from the lips of this latter official she learned that certain stock standing in a certain name had been sold out within the last half-hour. The book was shown her—her name, as it appeared in the Bank certificate, had been signed by the female who personated her—and that female could have been none other than the treacherous woman who had treated her with such a show of hospitality and friendship.

For a few moments a palsy of the heart and brain seized upon the wretched girl—and a mortal shivering assailed her. Her limbs gave way beneath her—and she clung to the counter for support.

"A forgery has been committed, then?" said the clerk: and the words, which he repeated for the third time, fell upon her ears and recalled her to her senses.

"A forgery—yes—and I am ruined!" she gasped painfully: then, as a sudden idea struck her, she fled precipitately from the room.

But the clerk hurried after her—and, overtaking the wretched girl as she was speeding through the courtyard, he said, "I beg your pardon, Miss—but so serious an affair must be looked into immediately."

"I am going somewhere for that purpose," replied the orphan, in a rapid and excited tone.

"You will return, then—you will assist the officers of justice, if necessary, in adopting the proper proceedings——"

"Yes—yes—I will return," exclaimed Camilla, the dread of seeing a last hope destroyed now rendering her even angrily impatient and petulant.

And, breaking abruptly away from the clerk, she sped forth from the Bank of England.

A hackney-coach was passing at the time: she stopped it—entered the vehicle—and ordered the driver to take her to Westminster and set her down in the immediate vicinity of the Abbey.

The ride, instead of serving as an interval for her to regain her composure, only tended to increase the excitement under which she laboured. For her impatience became agonising: she longed to repair to the house where she had slept, in the hope of encountering the woman, and either by threats or entreaties inducing her to surrender a part, if not the whole, of the amount which she had received at the Bank. But the coach was drawn by two miserable hacks which crept along at a snail's pace; and, to add to her vexation, Cheapside was thronged with vehicles. Thus was her progress impeded—and all the while her own ideas travelled with the speed of lightning. For she fancied that the man and woman who, under the guise of friendship, had so scandalously plundered her, would have time to return to their abode, pack up their things, and decamp ere she could possibly reach the place. Her impatience therefore grew maddening: and on reaching the Abbey she was in such a state of exhaustion, through the intense workings of her feelings, that she could not immediately alight from the vehicle.

Three times did the coachman inform her, as he stood holding the door wide open, that she had reached her destination,—three times before she could rightly understand him. Then—suddenly reanimated with courage, strength, and energy—she sprang forth and was darting away, when the driver demanded his fare. Her reply was that she should return in a few moments: but her wild and excited manner rendered him suspicious—and he insisted upon being paid at once. Though burning with anxiety to rush onward, Camilla was compelled to yield; and the liquidation of the coachman's claim exhausted the contents of her purse. She was now penniless!

But not pausing to reflect upon this circumstance, nor even heeding the driver's question whether he was to wait for her, the almost maddened girl plunged into that maze of streets in which she knew the house where she had slept was situated. To find this dwelling was not however so easy a task as she had at first anticipated. For the streets in low, obscure and vile neighbourhoods are so much alike—and squalor, vice, and misery assimilate all things which come within their fatal scope. Thus, having chased frantically up and down in that labyrinth of poor habitations, Camilla was compelled to relax her pace; and it was when, completely exhausted, she was dragging herself painfully along, scrutinizing every door and every house-front, that she lighted on the abode which she sought.

A gleam of joy flashed through the black and cheerless void into which the wretchedness of a few hours had changed her heart; and she knocked hastily at the door.

The summons was obeyed by a hideous-looking man on whose bald head an excrescence or wen protruded with a disgusting effect, and on every lineament of whose countenance crime was stamped indelibly.

"Are the people of the house at home?" inquired Camilla timidly—for her heart again sank completely within her at the appearance of so repulsive an individual.

"Who dy'e mean?" demanded the fellow, with a tone and manner that were not only brutal but even menacing.

"I mean the man and his wife who gave me a lodging here last night," responded the young girl: "I do not know their names——"

"Lord bless ye!" ejaculated the repulsive individual: "you'll never hear of them no more. They're gone for good, young Miss, I can tell you."

And with these words, which sounded the knell of the orphan's last hope, the fellow banged the door violently in her face.

She turned away—that poor friendless girl—as if she had just heard her death-sentence pronounced. Her countenance was so ghastly pale it seemed as if the blood could almost be perceived in the blue veins: her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth—her throat was as dry as if she had swallowed ashes. Great God! what was to become of her?—whither was she to go?—where seek an asylum? Not at Mrs. Bruce's fashionable establishment which the vices of the aristocratic and the profligacy of the great and titled had converted into a luxurious brothel discreetly conducted,—oh! no—not for worlds would she return thither! Death—death—aye, even death by starvation—death in the open

street, on the cold pavement,—yes—such a death were preferable to the loss of her honour!

Alas! alas: poor orphan girl, deeply—deeply do we sympathise with thee—boundless is our compassion, O persecuted virgin!

But whither does she now fly so quickly?—what new idea has seized upon her imagination?—what sudden impulse is she obeying thus precipitately? She remembers that there is such a person in the world as Meagles—she is hastening to Jermyn Street to ascertain whether it be really true that he has undertaken a journey to Scotland. For this purpose is she speeding on so frantically again—'tis her only hope—and her ardent longing to find it realized, lends wings to her feet.

But a sudden vertigo seizes upon her—she stops short—her brain reels—she staggers forward a few paces, extending her arms as if to implore assistance—then sinks upon a door-step in that vile neighbourhood near the Abbey.

A moan of indescribable anguish escapes her lips—and her senses abandon her!

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

MRS. FITZHERBERT AND TOM MEAGLES.

In the splendidly-furnished drawing-room belonging to her own suite of apartments at Carlton House, Mrs. Fitzherbert was seated alone, in a pensive mood, upon a sofa placed near the fire which burnt in the grate as if with a cheerfulness that mocked her mournful aspect.

Not only was she indignant and offended on account of the scene which had occurred on the night of the ball: but there was likewise a presentiment of approaching evil weighing heavily upon her heart. For though this was by no means the only quarrel which she had ever experienced with the Prince of Wales, it was nevertheless the first that had lasted so long and that had led to no attempt at reconciliation on his part.

What could this perseverance in maintaining a state of enmity mean?—what did it signify? Had her charms lost their spells—her witcheries their power—her enchantments their fascination? Or, was his Royal Highness in reality so deeply attached to Lady Dunborough that he not only pined on account of the disappointment he had experienced, but likewise cherished an unforgiving rancour against her who had thus interposed between himself and the intended victim of his lust?

The untoward incident had taken place on Monday night: it was now Thursday afternoon—and the Prince had not even sent to inquire concerning her health. Two mortal days had thus passed—a third was drawing to its close—and not a word nor a line from him who before God was her husband, though the detestable laws made by man forbade the connexion. At first the lady's indignation and resentment sustained on her own side a feeling which would have made her decline any answer to a verbal message and send back a written one unopened: then, as her more angry sentiments gave way to the fondness which she really experienced for the Prince, her pride prompted her to shroud herself in a reserve as gloomy as that in which he had shut himself up;—and thus from neither side had emanated the least overture towards a reconciliation. Though living beneath the same roof, this husband and wife had not seen each other for three whole days!

Now therefore the lady's pride was more than ever wounded; and indignation was again asserting its empire in her breast. How haughty was now that curl on her exquisitely chiselled lip!—how menacing was the light which shone in her large blue eyes!—how nervously did her taper fingers play with the long, pale, glossy tresses which flowed down upon her plump shoulders of dazzling whiteness and the bosom of such luxurious proportions!

Should she await the royal pleasure of her husband to make up their serious differences?—or should she pen a line conveying the first overture to him?

These were the questions which she asked herself in a moment of milder mood: and she was deliberating the points within her own breast, when a servant threw open the door of the apartment, announcing Mr. Meagles.

A glow of triumph and the animation of joy lighted up the splendid features of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she rose to receive the guest: for it instantly struck her that he was come as a messenger of peace from his Royal Highness.

Meagles, who was attired in a suit of black, but whose coat nevertheless had a certain sporting cut about it, endeavoured to assume a demureness of countenance which he deemed suitable to the task which he had taken in hand: and indeed, he did feel dissatisfied and low-spirited concerning it—for, much as he really disliked Mrs. Fitzherbert, he could not resist the painful reflection, now when matters were coming to a point, that it was a woman against whom he was about to wage war. Even at the last moment would he have gladly retreated from any farther interference in the business: but interest—self-interest—egotism,—*these* prevailed with a man who was far from being deficient in qualities naturally generous and traits unquestionably amiable.

With a greater courtesy than she had ever before manifested towards him, did Mrs. Fitzherbert proffer her hand to Mr. Meagles and request him to be seated: then, with the tact of that good breeding which affected to see in him only an ordinary visitor and not a messenger sent on a special errand, she began to converse on the current topics of the day with as much graceful ease and unpretending fluency as if she had naught weighing on her mind.

Meagles was far more embarrassed than he thought he should be. Mrs. Fitzherbert's cordiality of manner disarmed him of the rancour which he had cherished against her; and her extreme beauty touched his heart, enlisting his sympathies in spite of himself. He adored the fair sex—and it struck him as being something criminal to plunge into the deepest woe the superb creature whose eyes were now beaming kindly and whose lips were smiling upon him.

But he thought of the dukedom which he hoped to gain eventually—and once more did egotism triumph!

Averting his head partially, so that the lady's artillery of charms and fascinations should not play with such powerful effect upon his looks, he availed himself of a momentary pause in the discourse to observe, "Madam—your Royal Highness—I know not exactly which to call you——"

"Ah! then at all events you are no stranger to the secret of my marriage with the Prince of Wales!"

interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a smile that displayed the brilliant teeth between the parting coral of the lips.

"His Royal Highness keeps few secrets from me, madam," said Meagles, catching a glimpse of the handsome countenance as it appeared handsomer than ever when the light of so sweet a smile played upon it: then, again averting his eyes, he added, "Yes, madam—I am aware that the marriage ceremony was celebrated between yourself and his Royal Highness——"

"And I presume and hope that the Prince speaks of it with respect!" exclaimed the lady, suddenly alarmed by the peculiarity which was apparent in the tone and manner of Tim Meagles as he made the observation which she thus interrupted.

"Oh! his Royal Highness entertains the utmost respect towards you, madam," responded Meagles, not daring to look at her as he thus spoke; "and whatever may happen, he will ever adopt measures to ensure your happiness and prosperity."

"Whatever may happen!" repeated Mrs. Fitzherbert, with increasing alarm—a terror that she vainly endeavoured to conceal; for it was apparent in the half-excited, half-tremulous tone in which she gave utterance to those words.

"And I am sure, madam," continued Meagles, "that no one can regret more deeply—more profoundly—more bitterly than his Royal Highness, the necessity which compels him to yield obedience to his august father's will——"

"I begin to understand you, sir," murmured the lady, in a faint voice: then subduing her emotions with a great though painful effort, she said, "Tell me candidly, Mr. Meagles—has the Prince sent you to me on this occasion?"

And she laid her hand gently on his arm as she spoke—as if appealing in a friendly spirit to his honour and his generosity to treat her with frankness and candour.

"It is by the desire of his Royal Highness that I have sought this interview," replied Meagles, who was compelled to look Mrs. Fitzherbert in the face as he thus answered her query: and the anxiety which he saw depicted there, in spite of her strenuous endeavours to veil her feelings, did him harm.

"You are a messenger from his Royal Highness,—and the bearer of evil tidings, Mr. Meagles," said the lady, after a few moments' pause. "But tell me all that the Prince has commanded you to communicate—keep me not in suspense, Mr. Meagles, I implore you."

"Madam," resumed the individual thus energetically appealed to, "I beseech you to prepare yourself to hear intelligence which will no doubt distress you. But the Prince relies upon that attachment which you experience for him—that love which you bear him——"

"Then assuredly the tidings which you are about to impart, are more serious than I could have possibly anticipated," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her courage and presence of mind rapidly oozing away; "for it is evident that the Prince has well instructed you how to gild your prefatory words and administer a little honey to mitigate the after bitterness of a vast amount of gall. Oh! Mr. Meagles, if you have any compassion for me, you will at once and without farther delay tell me what his Royal Highness proposes—wishes—or commands."

"The Prince is forced, madam," replied Meagles, "to give his assent to this alliance which has been planned for him——"

"With Caroline of Brunswick!" ejaculated the lady, a visible trembling passing over her magnificent form: and, while the blood rushed to her countenance, dyeing her cheeks with a crimson hue that made them appear in strong contrast with the pale colour of her shining hair, she bit her lip convulsively in order to restrain an outburst of those feelings which suddenly began to boil within her.

"Yes—with Caroline of Brunswick, madam," repeated Meagles. "No one is better acquainted than yourself with the peculiar position in which the Prince of Wales is placed. His debts are enormous—and the only way of inducing the House of Commons, servile and grovelling as it is towards the Royal Family, to vote the funds to liquidate those liabilities, is by offering the marriage of his Royal Highness as a guarantee for his future steadiness."

"His Royal Highness *is* married, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, rising from her seat and drawing herself up so proudly and with an air of such queenly hauteur that Meagles was for a few minutes completely overawed. "Yes," continued the lady, in a tone well suited to the feminine dignity of her manner and the loftiness of her bearing,—"the Prince of Wales is married—and I am his wife! I know it may be objected that there is in existence a certain law entitled the Royal Marriage Act, which was passed twenty-three years ago, and in contravention of which I have become the wife of his Royal Highness. I am aware, therefore, that the detestable technicalities of law courts may pronounce our alliance illegal—and a vile statute may be made to triumph even over the ordinances of God. But such a monstrous proceeding shall not be allowed to take its course without resistance—aye, a bitter resistance on my part. For marriage is a tie which cannot be trifled with—unless indeed Parliaments shall at once proclaim themselves an authority superior to God and God's ordinances, and declare that they are justified in repealing all the beneficent provisions of the Christian Church in order to suit the whims and pander to the caprices of Royalty. No, Mr. Meagles—the Prince shall not divorce me thus! I love him enough to die for him—but not sufficiently to permit myself to be made the sport of his pleasure and the victim of his convenience: for death were preferable to such an insult!"

And having thus spoken, Mrs. Fitzherbert sank down exhausted upon her seat.

"Madam," said Meagles, in a deep and solemn tone,—"I have listened to you with the utmost attention—and I perfectly agree with you in all the opinions which you have enunciated. For I admit the infamy, the scandal, and the atrocity of the Royal Marriage Act, which suspends in respect to a single family those laws which apply to the millions forming the rest of the community. But allow me to remind you that the English Monarchy is in reality as despotic and as absolute as that of Russia—with only this exception, that whereas the Russian Sovereign promulgates his will all at once in the shape of an ukase, the English Sovereign establishes his tyranny through the medium of a servile Parliament. Nevertheless, madam, it is as easy for the King of England as for the Emperor of Russia to perpetrate a foul wrong—the way in which it is done is alone different."

"And what would you have me infer from all

this, Mr. Meagles?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a cold tone: for her excitement had subsided into a glacial aspect of stern determination.

"I would have you understand, madam, that it is utterly useless for you to oppose the will of the British Sovereign," responded Meagles. "He is resolved that the heir-apparent shall marry the Princess of Brunswick—and this self-same heir-apparent dares not disobey him. Under these circumstances, madam, it will be worse than useless for you to throw any objection in the way: for the King's fiat has gone forth—and the Prince has made up his mind to yield with as good a grace as he can well assume."

"And I am to be sacrificed, Mr. Meagles?" said the lady, in a tone so cold and passionless that it seemed as if a marble statue were speaking—and as a marble statue, too, was she now pale, and motionless, and still, all save those white lips between which her words came slowly and freezingly.

"Madam—you will not, I hope, indulge in harsh terms," exclaimed Meagles: "for all the severity of expression which the English language is capable of conveying, will not amend the position of affairs. But if you compel me to unfold the truth in all its naked plainness, I must candidly and frankly inform you that King George III would not only sacrifice one poor weak woman, but would see a hundred thousand beautiful female hearts bursting and breaking ere he would yield a single tittle of his purpose. This is the solemn fact, madam—and with pain and grief is it that I give you so hopeless an assurance. But remember—as yet the King is unacquainted with the fact, that a marriage ceremony was ever performed between yourself and his son——"

"Our interview need not be prolonged, Mr. Meagles," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, slowly rising from her seat.

"It cannot be concluded, madam, until something definite be settled," he answered, not rudely but firmly.

"Am I to understand that you await a reply from my lips, in order to convey it to his Royal Highness?" demanded the lady, fixing her eyes keenly upon his countenance.

"Madam, the affair is no longer in the hands of the Prince of Wales," said Meagles, solemnly and impressively.

"Then, in whose charge is it?" asked Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"In mine!" rejoined Meagles.

"Ah!" ejaculated the lady, a flush re-appearing on her cheeks and dying away again as suddenly: "then I am to understand that I behold in you an enemy?"

"God forbid that you should force me into an act of hostility!" exclaimed Meagles.

"Nevertheless, your words prove that, under particular circumstances, you are prepared to act as the offensive," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her eyelids, her lips, and her bosom now evincing a nervous trepidation which betokened that her glacial calmness of purpose was changing into excitement and agitation once more.

"To prevent any and every misconception on this most painful interview," observed Meagles, "permit me to inform you that you must expect to behold his Royal Highness no more—otherwise than as a friend."

"And if I insist this cruel doubleness—if I proclaim open hostility to this treacherous conduct—if I assert my rights——" gasped the unhappy lady, throwing a look of mingled entreaty, apprehension, and suspicion on Meagles as he stood before her with half-averted countenance.

"O madam!" he exclaimed, in a tone which showed that his heart was not callous to all the pathos of this singular but touching scene; "compel me not to give utterance to menaces—force me not to speak in an unmanly way towards you——"

"Nay—I will not be thus easily crushed—thus readily subdued!" ejaculated the lady, in a moment recovering her presence of mind and the energy of her character. "I know that you are capable of anything desperate, Mr. Meagles—but I defy your threats!"

"And yet you must suspect, madam," he said, in a tone full of meaning, "that I am acquainted with a secret concerning yourself—a secret involving your honour, madam——Ah! that tell-tale blush shows that I am not misunderstood——"

"But the Marquis de Bellois would not be villain enough to proclaim in his sober moments what he has doubtless boasted of to you, sir, in his wine-cups," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, the colour coming and going with rapid alternations upon her countenance, and her whole frame trembling with concentrated rage.

"I require not the Marquis de Bellois' words to corroborate the tale which it is in my power to tell," said Tim Meagles, forcing himself thus to give utterance to threats of which he was profoundly ashamed.

"Ah! then you fancy that the honour of a woman can be sullied beyond all redemption by the mere fact of your breathing upon it?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of the bitterest scorn.

"Madam, you do wrong to provoke me," answered Meagles: "but the sooner you understand me fully, the better. Know, then, that you *must* yield to circumstances——"

"Begone, sir!—begone!" cried the lady, interrupting Meagles with sovereign imperiousness, and pointing towards the door.

"One word, madam—one word——"

"Not a syllable—unless it be to demand my pardon for an insolence which has already lasted much too long. Begone!" repeated the indignant lady: "or I will order my valets to thrust you ignominiously forth into the street!"

"Then learn the truth at last, madam!" cried Meagles, his face becoming purple: and drawing forth a packet of papers he held it significantly up before her eyes.

One glance—one single glance was sufficient to convince the startled and wretched lady that the damning proofs of her amour with the Marquis de Bellois were in the hands of her enemies—and, reeling half round, she sank heavily, like a dead weight, upon a sofa.

She retained her senses—Oh! retained them most keenly, most acutely: for it appeared as if lightnings had suddenly blasted all her hopes—as if the powers of hell clasped her limbs;—and, a cold perspiration breaking out all over her, she was drenched in her own excruciating agony.

"Madam, pardon me—in the name of God! pardon me, for doing all this," exclaimed Meagles, terrified by the appearance of the unhappy lady: "but I am the creature of circumstances——"

"No, sir—no—the creature of your own diabolical selfishness!" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a rending tone. "You are persecuting me that you may gain a triumph: but sooner or later heaven will punish you for the part you have this day taken against me. Tell me, however—tell me," she said, her manner suddenly becoming subdued and her voice sinking, "does he—the Prince—does he know that you possess those papers——"

"As God is a witness to my words, the secret itself—your secret—is unknown and unsuspected by his Royal Highness," exclaimed Meagles.

"And it will remain so, provided that I obey the conditions which you dictate?" she demanded, in a hoarse thick tone: then, without waiting for a reply, she added, "Had I been left to contend only with the Prince, whom I still look upon and claim as a husband, I would not have yielded—Oh! no—never, never! Nor should all the power which the King might exercise, when informed of the position wherein I stand with regard to his son, have induced me to disavow my marriage or place a seal on my lips respecting it. To the nation would I have appealed—to the country would I have addressed myself. But since you, sir, have declared yourself the Prince's champion in the perpetration of this tremendous wrong, I am forced to submit: for I know," she exclaimed, her eyes glaring wildly—even savagely upon him,—"I know that you would not scruple to coerce me by the means which a villain's treachery has placed in your hands. And now, sir," she demanded, after a few instants' pause,—"what are your orders?"

"The conditions I propose, madam, are that you leave Carlton House as soon as convenient," said Meagles, not daring to look her in the face; "and I will guarantee that a handsome provision shall be made for you by his Royal Highness."

"Not a shilling, sir—not a single shilling!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, summoning all the dignity and hauteur of her character to her aid: for unless she were thus sustained in a condition of unnatural

calmness, she felt that her heart would burst. "And now, sir," she said, in a tone which was so cold and with a manner which was so glacial that it froze the blood in Meagles' veins,—"you may return to your royal master, the Prince of Wales. Tell him that you have done his behest—that you have succeeded in inducing me to say farewell for ever to this abode in which I have passed *some* happy hours—and that I do not seek even a moment's interview with him ere I cross this threshold, never to return. Go, sir—and in less than an hour Mrs. Fitzherbert will be no longer an inmate of Carlton House."

Thus speaking, she waved her hand imperiously—and Meagles retired with precipitation from the presence of a woman against whom he had suffered himself to be made the instrument of so diabolical a persecution.

Repairing straight to the private apartment in which the Prince of Wales was so anxiously expecting him, Meagles flung himself upon a seat—and, though he uttered not a word, his manner indicated that a very painful scene had taken place, but that it had ended agreeably to the wishes of the heir-apparent.

"I can read success in your countenance, Tim," said his Royal Highness: "but why are you also so infernally mournful?"

"Because I have this day played a part of which I am ashamed," was the emphatic response. "And yet there was no help for it—the step was rendered imperiously necessary by a variety of circumstances——"

"To be sure—to be sure!" ejaculated the Prince, interrupting his friend who was falling into a moaning humour: "there was no help for it! But what has been done?—will she go?—how have you managed?—does she want to see me?"

"Do you wish to *see her*?" demanded Meagles, almost savagely.

"Not I—no—I would rather not," returned the Prince, fearful that a last interview had been promised. "You do not mean to say that there is to be any leave-taking——"

"None—none!" cried Meagles, emphatically. "She will depart within an hour—unless indeed her heart should break——"

"Is it possible that she can be so powerfully affected?" exclaimed the heir-apparent, feeling a momentary sorrow stealing over him: but instantaneously recovering his hardihood, he said, "Well, Tim, you have indeed performed prodigies! Yesterday with my father—to-day with Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"And now, if you wish to testify your gratitude," interrupted Meagles, "you will at once cease from talking on the latter subject. I tell you that I am displeased with myself—and I feel cold all over as if with remorse. Let us change the conversation, then. Come—have you aught to communicate to me—no new amour——"

"By the bye," ejaculated the Prince of Wales, a sudden thought striking him,—"I have indeed something to speak to you about. You remember that money-lending fellow, Foster——"

"Who blew his brains out?" cried Meagles, darting a bitterly reproachful glance at his royal companion.

"The same," returned the latter coolly, and not noticing the peculiarity of Meagles' look at the moment. "Well—did you not know that this same man possessed a daughter—a very beautiful girl——"

"And how came you to know it?" demanded Meagles, turning sharply round towards the Prince.

"Egad! I never knew it at all till last night," continued his Royal Highness. "Only conceive the romance of the narrative I am about to unfold to your ears. Mrs. Brace—the dear, delectable, accommodating Mrs. Brace—received within her establishment a certain Camilla Morton—a sweet creature, attired in deep mourning for the recent loss of both her parents. As a matter of course I determined to possess the charming Camilla——"

"Well—go on—go on!" exclaimed Meagles, scarcely able to restrain the mingled impatience and indignation which now animated him. "You determined to possess the charming Camilla, you say—and Mrs. Brace doubtless aided you——"

"To be sure: she is devoted to me," returned the Prince. "Accordingly, last night I supped with the excellent milliner—and at the proper time I repaired to the young lady's chamber——"

"What! without my previous understanding, agreement, or appointment?" exclaimed Meagles. "Upon my word, you carry your love-conquests by storm," he added, concealing with a forced laugh the bitter vexation which he in reality experienced.

"By Jove! there was no conquest in this instance—but a signal defeat," cried the Prince.

"Ha! ha! let us hear all about it," said Meagles, his laugh now suddenly becoming hearty indeed.

"The tale is told in five words," continued his Royal Highness. "Miss Camilla Morton was sitting up, although it was past midnight—and she had not made the least preparation for retiring to rest. The fact is, she was in a pensive mood, and was giving way to mournful reflections. This much I ascertained by peeping through the key-hole of her door; and, unable to restrain my impatience, I burst in upon her reverie. After a short colloquy she appeared to consent to my views and wishes. but it was only a trick on her part to get me out of the room, under the pretence that she could not lay aside her clothing before me. And I was fool enough to believe her——"

"Fool indeed!" ejaculated Tim, with another merry laugh—for he now quite enjoyed the Prince's narrative. "What happened next?"

"Why—the cunning, daring, adventurous puss tied the sheets, blankets, and drapery together," continued his Royal Highness; "and she lowered herself from a second-floor window down to the pavement of St. James's Square."

"Merciful God!" exclaimed Meagles, terrified by the bare idea of this appalling feat: "what—without experiencing the slightest injury? Impossible!"

"It is so possible, my dear fellow," returned the Prince, "that I saw it all with my own eyes. And now for the sequel. Prior to trusting herself to the rope, she had most likely intended to secure about her person any papers of consequence which she possessed—for the contents of her work-box and drawers were all thrown confusedly out in different directions: and in her hurry she doubtless dropped a letter upon the floor. At all events, I picked one up: and behold! it was directed to *Miss Rose Foster*, and addressed to the very house in the Edgeware Road where my money-lending Foster used to dwell. The truth flashed to my mind in a moment

Camilla Morton was in mourning for the recent loss of both her parents—the name must be an assumed one—and she could be none other than the daughter of those Fosters who perished so lamentably! Such was the conviction which burst upon me; and I candidly confess that I was staggered for the instant. Something like a remorse sprang up in my breast——"

"Aye — likely enough," interrupted Meagles: "for you must confess that it would not have been an agreeable sequence to the tragedy of the parents had you persecuted the orphan daughter to death."

"Are you in earnest, Tim — speaking so seriously?" cried the heir-apparent, in amazement at this display of softness and emotion on his friend's part.

"Perhaps I may be," responded Meagles, drily. "But the young lady got clear off, I suppose?"

"Oh! in perfect safety," rejoined the Prince. "The letter which thus made known to me who she really is, was only an epistle from some school-acquaintance, written several months ago. And now I will tell you what I want you to do, my dear fellow."

"What?" demanded Meagles.

"To make inquiries who the girl's relatives and friends are," returned his Royal Highness; "and endeavour to trace her out. I am determined that she shall not escape me thus——"

At this moment Germain entered the room.

"What do you want?" demanded the Prince, annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of his observations.

"I am ordered to announce to your Royal Highness that Mrs. Fitzherbert has taken her departure from Carlton House:"—and having delivered this message, the valet bowed and withdrew.

"Now, thank God! I am unshackled once more," exclaimed the Prince, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"But only for a short time," answered Meagles, rising from his seat. "In a few months you will have to lead the Princess Caroline of Brunswick to the altar."

"And the idea of that marriage weighs upon my soul like a presentiment of evil," rejoined the heir-apparent, a deep gloom suddenly spreading itself over his countenance.

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE BARGAIN OF CRIME.

It was between nine and ten o'clock on the Sunday evening following the incidents just related—and although dark clouds were piled upon the face of heaven, yet were they so broken that the moon shone brightly forth from amidst them, silvering the edges of their sombre masses.

The Magsman, with his club under his arm, and his hands in his pockets, prowled up and down the road on the western extremity of Hyde Park; and every time he passed a particular clump of trees, he muttered in a low hoarse tone, "No one's made their appearance yet, old feller."

"They'll come, I daresay," was the responsive growl that came from behind the huge trunks of the leafless trees.

Then no more was said—and the Magsman resumed his walk, which the coldness of the night however accelerated into a short trot.

Presently he beheld some one approaching; and in a few minutes a man of middle-height, enveloped in a capacious cloak, and having a black mask over all the upper part of his countenance, accosted the Magsman.

"You are punctual," said the stranger: and Warren instantly recognised the voice of the individual whom he had encountered at Mrs. Brace's abode and by whom the present appointment was made.

"I've been a-waiting for you this last half-hour," responded the Magsman; "and therefore I'm more than punctual. But what's the business about?"

"I presume you are not over particular what you do to earn money?" said the stranger, interrogatively; and the Magsman could distinguish two dark eyes gleaming intently upon him through the holes in the mask.

"As little particular as a man can be in these hard times," was the response that he gave.

"You have your price for every species of crime which can be suggested to you?" continued the unknown querist.

"There's nothing you can name that I won't do," answered the Magsman,—"provided the reward is a fat one. Now do you comprehend me, sir? For I suppose you want to be assured as to the lengths which I'm prepared to go, before you open your mind to me," added the ruffian.

"You have accurately divined my intention," responded the stranger: then, sinking his voice to the lowest audible whisper, he said, "And murder has its price as well as aught beside?"

"To be sure," exclaimed the Magsman. "For instance, if I thought you was putting a plant upon me now, I'd shoot you through the head as unceremoniously as I'd eat my dinner;"—and the moonbeams glanced on the barrel of a pistol which he drew from his pocket.

"Put up your weapon, my good fellow," said the nobleman—for such, as the reader will remember, he was—although the Magsman was not aware of the circumstance: "we shall do some business together, instead of quarrelling, ere we part."

"So much the better. But I thought it as well just to let you see that I don't stand the slightest nonsense," observed the Magsman. "And now proceed with any more questions you may wish to put to me."

"From what took place between yourself and your wife the other night," resumed the stranger, "it is clear that you incur constant dangers by remaining in this country. Now, if you had your purse well filled, would you not like to try your fortunes on the other side of the Atlantic?"

"In America," ejaculated the Magsman: and he was about to give a decisive negative, accompanied with the remark that there was no place like London for a man *of his profession*, when suddenly checking himself, he substituted an affirmative answer—observing, "Yes—if it was made worth my while, I shouldn't at all mind visiting them free States which have thrown off the yoke of old George III. But if a murder is to be committed," he continued with a coolness which made the nobleman shudder, though he himself had suggested that such a crime was in contemplation,—"it surely

isn't necessary to go all the way to America to cut a chap's throat."

"Not at all," was the immediate answer. "But it suits my purpose that when the business which I have in hand shall be completed, those whom I may have engaged to carry it into execution shall be shipped without delay for America. If this proposal meets your views, well and good: if not, we may go our ways at once and no harm is done."

"Anything suits my book," said the Magsman, "as long as there's blunt forthcoming and plenty of it."

"I think, then, that we shall agree very shortly," observed the unknown. "Have you a faithful friend whom you can trust—a man like yourself——"

"As like me in villany as two peas," interrupted the Magsman: "but I should say he was a trifle uglier in the face."

"And he would consent not only to bear his part *in any crime*," continued the nobleman,—"but likewise to bid farewell to his native land for ever, and settle in America with the fruits of this service which I require?"

"I can answer for him as easily as for myself," replied Warren.

"Five thousand pounds, then, are the price which I offer for the deed that is to be done," said the stranger.

"'Tis a grand sum—two thousand five hundred a-piece," observed the Magsman. "But how is it to be paid?—all in a lump?"

"Decidedly not," was the emphatic answer:—"or else what guarantee have I that you will embark for America when once the money is in your pocket? These are the terms I propose:—"Five hundred pounds a-piece, for you and your friend, the moment we reach the place where the deed *is to be accomplished*. Five hundred pounds more for each, so soon as the deed *shall have been accomplished*. The remaining fifteen hundred pounds a-piece to be paid when you stand on the deck of the vessel at Liverpool."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the Magsman. "These are terms which don't require much consideration. And now, when is the affair to be carried into execution?"

"To-night, if you can procure the aid of your friend at once," answered the nobleman: "and if not, to-morrow night at latest.'

"As for my friend," said Joe Warren,—"I could get him with us in a brace of shakes: but the notice for to-night is so precious short—and we've both got friends to take leave of—besides, I've a young woman I should like to take out with me—and my pal has got a daughter that he'd wish to say good-bye to——"

"You could both write to your friends from Liverpool," interrupted the nobleman; "and the young woman you speak of might follow you in the very next ship. Therefore, if you can possibly make arrangements for to-night, I shall be well pleased—inasmuch as *my* preparations are all in readiness."

"It shall be as you wish," said the Magsman. "And in the same way as you made preparation in the belief that the thing would come off to-night, so did I take a similar precaution in the expectation that there was business in hand which might probably give employment to *two*. Now then, Price—old feller—come along!" he exclaimed, bawling out loud.

"All right!" ejaculated a voice from a short distance; and at the same moment the Big Beggarman emerged from behind an adjacent knot of trees.

"I also am provided with weapons, understand," exclaimed the nobleman, in an impressive tone to Joe Warren; "and I hesitate not to punish treachery."

Thus speaking he thrust forth his arms from beneath his cloak—and each hand grasped a pistol, the click of which as he cocked them fell sharply on the Magsman's ears.

"Lord bless ye, sir," ejaculated the latter; "me and my pal are as harmless as doves towards our patrons. Only, to tell you the truth, I didn't know but what some plant might be meant against *me*, in which case I had the Big Beggarman—for that's his name—close handy to assist. And it's lucky that I took such a precaution, since you want your business to come off to-night and it requires two to do it."

"Very lucky," observed the nobleman laconically, as he concealed his weapons beneath his cloak. "But I leave you to explain matters to your companion."

Thus speaking, he walked a little way aside—keeping a sharp eye, however, through his mask upon the two villains, who were soon in earnest conversation together. Their discourse did not however last long: for at the expiration of a few minutes, the Magsman accosted the nobleman, saying, "I knew it would be all right—and I told you so. My pal is perfectly agreeable, and accepts the conditions which you've proposed. In fact, he's quite ready to cut as many throats from ear to ear as you may want us to try our hands upon."

"Follow me, then!" exclaimed the nobleman, a cold shudder passing over his form as this terrible language fell upon his ears.

The party proceeded at a rapid pace until they reached the Tyburn Road on the northern boundary of Hyde Park; and beneath the shade of the trees over-hanging the wall of Kensington Gardens, a private carriage drawn by two horses was waiting. The lamps of the vehicle were not lighted—the blinds were drawn up—and no servant was in attendance save the postilion, who wore a drab great-coat and a shawl handkerchief coming up to his nose.

This individual opened the door in silence the moment he beheld his master approaching in company with the two men; and the three got into the carriage, one corner of which was already occupied by a female. The nobleman placed himself next to her: the Magsman and the Big Beggarman took their seat opposite, which was the one nearest to the horses;—and the postilion closed the door upon the party. In another moment the vehicle sped rapidly away down the road.

Complete darkness reigned inside, all the blinds being carefully drawn up. A long silence likewise prevailed, but this was presently interrupted by the nobleman offering the two ruffians refreshments, with which, it appeared, the pockets of the carriage were well supplied. Substantial sandwiches and flasks of brandy were presented to them; and in spite of the intense obscurity, neither the Mags-

riage: the nobleman and his fair companion resumed their places by each other's side—the Magsman and the Big Beggarman seated themselves opposite—the blinds were pulled up again—and the vehicle rolled rapidly away from the vicinage of the spot where so tremendous a crime had been perpetrated.

And still neither the Magsman nor the Big Beggarman entertained the slightest notion of where they were, nor what part of England had been made the theatre of so foul a tragedy.

For upwards of an hour did the carriage proceed without stopping: and at length it halted. The blinds were put down again—the party alighted—and the Magsman and Beggarman, on casting their looks around, perceived that the vehicle was standing at the door of a small but neat cottage on the threshold of which an old man and woman were bowing respectfully to the nobleman and the lady. This habitation stood in a lonely spot, by the side of a narrow road which evidently was not a great highway; and the ivy-covered tower of a village church peeped above a hill at a distance of about two miles.

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman were forthwith conducted by the old couple, who were dressed like peasants in comfortable circumstances, into a neat room serving alike as kitchen and parlour; and their eyes were not only gladdened by the appearance of a cheerful log-fire blazing on the ample hearth, but also by the preparations that were in progress for a comfortable breakfast. A clock, which stood in a corner of the room, showed them that it was now nine o'clock on this memorable morning.

The nobleman and lady remained outside in earnest conversation for nearly ten minutes, at the expiration of which period they entered the cottage. By this time the coffee was made by the old woman; and the lady, having hastily partaken of a cup, but without removing her mask, shook hands with the nobleman and returned to the carriage which instantaneously drove away.

The unknown employer of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman now thrust another five-hundred pound note into the hands of each, whispering at the same time, "You are to remain here until the evening, when some little additional service—but of a less serious nature than the former," he observed significantly, "will be required at your hands. I may as well state that it will be useless for you to put any questions to these good people," he added, turning his masked countenance for a moment towards the old man and woman;—"inasmuch as they will turn a deaf ear to such inquiries. Moreover, should you even cross the threshold of the door without my permission, all the rest of our bargain becomes annulled in an instant and you forfeit the balance of the reward. Now do we understand each other?"

"Perfectly," answered the Magsman; "and neither me nor my pal will do anything for you to disapprove of."

"Sit down, then," said the nobleman, "and partake of the breakfast which is now served up."

The men to whom this invitation was addressed, did not require a second bidding: but placing themselves at the table they commenced a desperate onslaught on the hot coffee, home-made bread, rashers of bacon, and new-laid eggs which were served up with no niggard hand. The nobleman, taking off his cloak and appearing in a handsome suit of black, seated himself at a side-table, with his back towards the Magsman and the Big Beggarman, so that he might raise his mask conveniently to enable him to eat his breakfast without standing the chance of disclosing his features to those individuals.

The meal being concluded, the Magsman and Beggarman assented to a proposal which was made to them that they should take a few hours' rest in indemnification for the disturbed night which they had passed inside the carriage; and they were accordingly conducted to a bed-chamber. There they slept until the old man came to arouse them at two o'clock in the afternoon with the agreeable intimation that dinner was ready; and, on descending to the lower room, they found a smoking joint, flanked with dishes of vegetables and jugs of home-brewed ale, already served upon the table. To this repast they did ample justice—while the nobleman partook of his dinner at the side-table.

But even if this personage had not wished to place himself in such a manner that he could eat unobserved by the Magsman and Beggarman—even, we mean, if he had worn no mask at all—still he would not have taken a seat at the same table with them. No—that insufferable pride which animates the English aristocracy would have made him loathe and abhor the idea of associating so intimately with men belonging to a lower grade for not even the companionship of crime—the complicity of murder,—no—not even this hideous connexion could have induced him to fraternise with the paid instruments of his dark iniquity.

The meal being concluded, pipes and tobacco were supplied to the Magsman and his companion, who addressed themselves to the enjoyment thereof accordingly; and the nobleman retired up-stairs, most probably to snatch a few hours rest. At all events he did not re-appear until tea was prepared at about seven o'clock,—Joe Warren and the Beggarman having in the interval smoked countless pipes and emptied numerous jugs of ale.

After tea the two men resumed their pipes: but instead of malt liquor they were now regaled with gin—and by the assistance of the tobacco and the spirits they whiled away the time pleasantly enough until ten o'clock, when an excellent supper was set before them. Of this meal the nobleman refused to partake: but Joe Warren and the Big Beggarman did ample justice to it—for, as they laughingly observed to the people of the house, "eating and drinking never came amiss to them."

At eleven o'clock the nobleman resumed his cloak, beneath which he concealed a dark lantern lent him by the old man, who likewise produced a shovel, a pick-axe, and a bag containing some smaller implements. Of these things the Magsman and the Big Beggarman took charge; and, guided by their unknown employer, they sallied forth from the cottage.

The moon shone brightly, illuminating the whole scene around and bringing the ivy-covered tower of the village church into strong relief. And it was towards this church that the nobleman led his two agents of evil across the fields—a journey which was performed in silence and without meeting a single soul.

CHAPTER XCI.

THE CHURCH.

THE party entered the churchyard which was crowded with tomb-stones that gleamed with spectral-like ghastliness in the cold moonlight; and the Magsman began to wonder whether the employer of himself and the Beggarman intended them to perform a little business in the resurrection way before he parted from them.

But the nobleman passed straight along the narrow path which, intersecting the cemetery, led to the church door; and here he stopped. The bag, of which the Big Beggarman had taken charge, furnished a bunch of keys, one of which speedily turned in the lock. The door was thrust open—and the nobleman entered the church with his companions.

The deep silence of the place struck as solemnly upon the heart as the intense chill of the atmosphere did upon the exterior senses; and it was evident that the nobleman felt a species of superstitious awe steal over him—for his hand trembled as he produced the dark lantern from beneath his cloak. As for the Magsman and the Beggarman—they knew not fear of any kind; and the effect of the profound stillness upon their minds was of the most evanescent description.

Passing along the aisle, the nobleman led the way to a small cloistral-looking nook, separated from the body of the church by a screen of sculptured stone, and evidently set apart for the monuments of those families which possessed hereditary sepulchres there.

Stooping down and throwing the light of the lantern in such a manner upon the pavement that he could read the inscriptions graven there, the nobleman in a few moments pointed out a particular

stone, which he bade the two men raise by the help of certain implements which they would find in the bag. At the same time he charged them to perform their work in such a manner that when replaced, the stone should afford no indication of having been recently raised.

The bag, as the nobleman intimated, was found to contain not only all the requisite tools for accomplishing the task now described—but likewise a box of cement for the purpose of refixing the stone in its setting. To work the Magsman and the Big Beggarman therefore went, their employer holding the dark lantern in such a way that while it effectually assisted them, its beams never once permitted them to read a single word of the inscription graven on the stone which they were removing.

In half-an-hour this huge fragment of the dull blue pavement was lifted away from the mouth of the vault which it covered; and a narrow flight of stone steps appeared, leading down into the deep darkness of a sepulchre whence a noisome effluvium exhaled — that peculiar odour which has naught like it, and which at once, even when the source is unknown, carries to the sense a conviction of the vicinage of decomposing mortality.

Having allowed some minutes to elapse for the foul air thus to expend itself, the nobleman bade his two assistants descend into the vault. They obeyed —and he hastened to follow them with the lantern in his hand.

The subterranean was spacious; and round the walls were arranged numerous coffins, in three rows —the lowest standing upon the paved floor, and the other two resting on stout iron supporters projecting from the solid masonry. By these means no coffin actually stood upon another; and between the rows there was space sufficient to enable the plates upon the lids to be examined without moving the coffins themselves.

Despite, however, of the interval allowed for the exhalation of the foul air, the stench which prevailed in the vault was almost intolerable; and the Magsman observed, with a terrible imprecation, that "the sooner they did whatever business there was to do, the better he should like it." With the propriety of this suggestion the Big Beggarman signified his concurrence in a remark that began and ended with oaths more horrible than even the one to which his companion had given utterance; and the blood of the nobleman actually curdled in his veins as this hideous language struck appallingly upon his ears.

"Silence!" he exclaimed, almost sinking beneath the shuddering effects of the cold tremor that passed over him: "such dreadful language is enough to awaken those who sleep around you."

"Me and my pal ain't afraid of the dead, sir," growled the Magsman, with a chuckle which seemed to strike upon the nobleman's mind as something that did him harm.

"I should think not!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman, with even a coarser and more brutal laugh. "I never did see any ghostesses yet—and if so be the dead does walk at times, this is a very favourable opportunity for one of 'em to get up and enjoy a mouthful of fresh air."

But scarcely were these words uttered, when a tremendous explosion, like the report of a cannon, sounded through the vault, accompanied with an effluvium so horrible—so nauseating—so stifling, as scarcely to leave the nobleman and his two assistants the power to scramble up the stone steps and retreat into the purer air of the aisle of the church.

The lantern, which the masked unknown carried in his hand, threw its gleaming rays upon the disturbed and agitated countenances of the two men, whose souls were now filled with a consternation which they vainly endeavoured to conceal from each other.

"What the devil could that have been, Joe?" demanded the Big Beggarman, throwing a stealthy look around him, as if he almost expected to see some hideous shape emerging from the obscurity that reigned beyond the scope of the lamp-light.

"I should say that it was Satan warning us not to trespass in his domains," answered the Magsman, with an ineffectual attempt at a chuckle: for the fellow was so bewildered by a din to him utterly unaccountable as to be really frightened, although he endeavoured to put a good face upon the matter.

"Banish your fears," said the nobleman, who had remained silent for a few minutes in order most probably that the recent occurrence should have time to produce a certain effect upon the men and induce them to abstain from that horrible language in which they had indulged in the vault and which sounded like tremendous blasphemy in his ears; but now perceiving that the incident was not calculated to produce any such beneficial effect, he thought it useless to delay any longer an explanation of the phenomenon which had frightened them. "The noise which startled us all three," he accordingly continued, "and which drove us so quickly from the vault, was caused by the sudden explosion of a leaden coffin."

"Well—I'm blowed if ever I should have thought of that!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman.

"It is nevertheless as I tell you," resumed the nobleman; "and you can now understand likewise the cause of the dreadful odour which assailed us at the same moment that the din fell upon our ears. It was from the effluvium, and not from the explosive din, that I beat so rapid a retreat. But we may now return to the vault."

Thither they accordingly retraced their steps; and, when once more in the subterranean, they perceived that one of the coffins on the uppermost row at the farther extremity, had burst completely open, and that a half decomposed corpse was exposed to view. A shudder passed visibly over the nobleman's frame—for his hand trembled so violently that he nearly dropped the lantern: but, regaining his composure with a great effort, he averted his eyes from the ghastly spectacle, and began to examine the plates on the coffins of the highest tier on the right hand side from the entrance.

While thus engaged, his back was turned towards the Magsman and the Big Beggarman: but every other instant he cast a rapid glance furtively around to assure himself that they were contemplating no treachery of any kind. In a few minutes he discovered the particular coffin-plate which, as it appeared, he sought: and, while his eyes lingered upon the inscription, the Magsman, who on his side had been rigidly though unsuspectedly watching all his movements, suddenly plucked off a signet-ring from one of the rotting fingers of the corpse that lay exposed in the broken leaden coffin.

This was the work of an instant; the nobleman saw it not—and, while the Big Beggarman nodded approvingly, Joe Warren secured the ring, in his

waistcoat pocket. But scarcely was the feat performed, when the employer of the two ruffians turned round and bade them take a chisel from the bag and remove the plate from the particular coffin to which he pointed. This was soon done—the nobleman holding the lantern in such a manner that, while it assisted the operation, it permitted not the operators themselves to read the inscription on the plate.

"What next?" demanded the Magsman, as the nobleman secured about his person the plate upon which he seized the moment it was wrenched away from the coffin-lid.

"Hold the light, and stand a little farther off," was the response.

Joe Warren and the Beggarman accordingly fell back a few paces, the former receiving the lantern from the hands of the nobleman, who now producing *another* plate from beneath his cloak, proceeded to fasten it on in the place whence the old one had been removed. This task was easily accomplished by means of four black screws and a screw-driver taken from the bag.

"Now we have done all our business in the vault," said the nobleman; and, receiving back the lantern from the Magsman, he led the way from the noisome subterranean which was still pervaded with a stifling, fetid odour that made the stomach sick, the heart heave, and the tongue experience a thick, clammy, and nauseating taste.

The Magsman and the Beggarman replaced the stone over the mouth of the vault: the box of cement already alluded to was brought into requisition; and the entire pavement, now uniform once more, was swept lightly with a small brush supplied by the bag—so that there was not the slightest indication nor appearance calculated to excite a suspicion of the sanctuary for the dead having been disturbed. And it may likewise be as well to reiterate the observation that while thus employed in consigning the huge flag back to its setting, the two men were not permitted by the masked unknown to catch a glimpse of the inscription graven upon it.

"Now follow me," he said, when this portion of the task was accomplished; and, quitting the cloistral nook, he led the way to the farther end of the church, where one of the keys upon the large bunch already mentioned, soon opened a door near the communion-table.

The party now entered the vestry, which was a small room, carpetted, and surrounded by bench-seats. A surplice and black gown hung against the wall; and in a half-open cupboard an empty decanter and two or three wine-glasses appeared upon a shelf. Over the mantel-piece there was a diminutive mirror, to the nail sustaining which a pair of clerical bands was hanging. From one side of the vestry-room a sort of closet opened; and in this recess was kept the iron safe containing the parish registers.

Giving the lantern to the Magsman, the nobleman tried the small keys of his bunch, one after the other, without any effect. The door of the iron safe remained immoveable—the lock afforded no symptoms of yielding.

"If it do not give way by fair means, it shall by foul!" exclaimed the unknown, the lower portion of his countenance which the mask left revealed, flushing with the excitement of impatience and vexation.

"Me and my pal would soon make light work of it," observed the Magsman. "There's plenty of implements in the bag that would force the obstinate safe."

"In fact," added the Big Beggarman, thinking it necessary to thrust in a word, "there's no safety at all in a safe when me and Joe Warren are concerned."

"You shall try your hands upon it if I cannot manage it without violence," said the nobleman. "But see—this key appears to fit it—yes—it yields—it yields!" he exclaimed, with an inexpressible outburst of joy which led his two assistants to believe that this was not the least important incident in the night's adventures. "Now that your services are not required for the moment," continued the unknown, as he drew forth one of the registers from the safe,—"you can seat yourselves and dispose of a flask of brandy while I inspect this book."

Thus speaking, he produced a case-bottle from beneath his cloak; and while the two ruffians sate down upon one of the benches in the vestry to enjoy it, the nobleman placed himself at the table for the purpose of examining the register.

With the lantern near him in such a manner that its light fell upon the pages as he turned them slowly over after a careful inspection of each, the unknown bent over the huge parochial volume with an attitude that denoted an absorbing interest; and though all the upper portion of his countenance was concealed by the black mask, yet there was an expression about the mouth which indicated a profound anxiety lest the record that he sought should not be there.

Leaf after leaf did he turn over—a quarter of an hour passed—the men emptied the brandy-flask—and then they conversed in low whispers. The nobleman seemed to have forgotten their presence, so profoundly absorbed was he in the register: and thus, while he was diligently searching for some entry, the ensuing dialogue took place between them.

"This is the rummest lark altogether that I ever knew in all my life," observed the Magsman.

"It's a reglar romance," returned the Big Beggarman. "But have you any idea whereabouts in England we are?"

"Not the remotest," was the response. "To do the gentleman justice, he has managed matters so well that he has even baffled *us* in that respect. But the day *may* come, my fine feller," added the Magsman significantly, "when we shall find out everything that is now so strange and mysterious. At present we've two distinct clues——"

"Two!" repeated the Big Beggarman: "how d'ye make that out? I only know of the signet-ring which you took off the finger of the mouldy stiff 'un down in the vault——"

"And the Christian name of that lady," added the Magsman. "Didn't you catch it?"

"To be sure I did!" was the reply. "What a fool I am to overlook such an important point. Besides, such a peculiar Christian name too——"

"Ah! it was a nice-looking young feller that screamed out that name," observed the Magsman. "It was almost a pity to put him into the hole. I wonder who the deuce he could have been——"

"And while you're wondering, you may just as well wonder about who the lady was also—and who

our friend *there* is," continued the Big Beggarman, nodding his head towards the nobleman who was still poring over the register. "But I say, Joe," added the ruffian, sinking his voice to a whisper that was scarcely audible, "what's to prevent us from knocking him on the head and helping ourselves to the contents of his pocket-book, instead of waiting till he pays us the balance at Liverpool?"

"Lord bless ye, my dear Stephen," returned the Magsman, in the same subdued tone; "do you suppose that I haven't been thinking of the same thing ever since I saw him take out his pocket-book for the first time, this morning when we were standing behind the pile of granite blocks? To be sure I have—and when we were smoking our pipes after dinner in the cottage, I was half a mind to propose to you to cut *his* throat and the old man's and woman's throats also, and so make light work of the business at once. But I thought better of it—and I tell you now that it's more to our interests to let things take their course."

"How so?" demanded the Beggarman. "Suppose the pocket-book contained more than he has still got to pay us?—then we should be the gainers."

"And suppose it contains less?" returned the Magsman, with a knowing look: "in this case we should be the losers. And it may be probable that the gentleman intends to get more money at Liverpool—or that he has left his pocket-book behind him at the cottage——"

"Well, there's certainly them chances against us," said the Beggarman, in a musing tone, although still speaking in a low whisper.

"But that's not the only calculation I've been making," continued the Magsman. "Of course we don't mean to go to America: *that* you and me have already decided upon between ourselves. Well, now—suppose we some day find out who *he* is—and who the lady is—and what all this business means?—why, let his fortune be whatever it will, at least half of it must find its way into our pockets. He couldn't refuse it—nor the lady either, whoever she is. They're completely in our power; and as they're no doubt well off already, and most likely mean to be much richer still—for this affair hasn't been undertaken for nothing, mark ye—it will be a splendid thing for us to find out who they are and have a hold upon them."

"You're right, Joe," observed the Big Beggarman, convinced by this reasoning: "we musn't knock him on the head. He'll be more use to us living—I see that now."

"To be sure," rejoined the Magsman; and, the question being thus disposed of, the matter dropped.

But while the two ruffians had been thus coolly and calmly deliberating upon the propriety or impropriety of assassinating their masked employer,—he on his part had succeeded in discovering the particular record which he sought in the parochial volume. A smile played upon his lip—and he rubbed his hands together joyfully. Then, taking a pen-knife from his pocket, he carefully scratched out certain words in that entry which regarded his interests or his views; and with equal caution he rubbed over it a very fine powder, or species of pounce, which he had brought for the purpose. The effect was that when he wrote *other words* in the place of those which he had erased, the ink did not run with an improper thickness upon the paper, nor afford any sign or indication that such a substitution had taken place. In fact, the forgery was complete and faultless in its execution: the handwriting of the original entry was imitated to a nicety;—and when the ink was entirely dry, the nobleman rubbed the paper gently with the tip of his fore-finger on which he collected a little dust by passing it along the mantel-piece. The result was to take away from the leaf that whiteness which appeared where the pen-knife had scratched it; and the page thus wore an uniform aspect, as if it had never been tampered with.

The register was now returned to its place—the safe was locked again—and the nobleman quitted the vestry, followed by his two agents. Along the aisle they proceeded, their footsteps raising echoes which made it seem as if there were other midnight visitors in the church: but this they knew to be a delusion—and in safety they emerged from the temple which their presence had so desecrated.

The nobleman was careful to lock the door behind him; and the trio retraced their way through the cemetery—across the fields—back to the cottage, at the door of which they found the travelling-carriage in readiness.

The reader will remember that the masked lady had taken her departure in the vehicle immediately after breakfast in the morning: and it had now returned to convey the nobleman and his two hired bravos to Liverpool.

The old couple were sitting up at the cottage, into which the Magsman and the Beggarman were invited to enter and partake of some hasty refreshment. The clock in the room showed them it was nearly two in the morning; and thus their nocturnal expedition had occupied three hours.

While they were regaling themselves with some cold meat and hot spirits-and-water, the nobleman presented them each with a hundred pounds, observing, "This is for the extra work which you have done to-night. The balance of the large sum due to both of you shall be paid, according to agreement, when you stand upon the deck of the American packet at Liverpool."

The men expressed their satisfaction;—and, the meal being concluded, they entered the carriage, followed by the nobleman.

The blinds were drawn up—total darkness reigned within—and the vehicle rolled rapidly away,—thus perpetuating that deep mystery which had all along been maintained towards the Magsman and the Big Beggarman respecting the whereabouts of those scenes through which they had passed, and the locality of those incidents in which they had borne so large a share.

CHAPTER XCII.

THE WAY-SIDE COTTAGE.—THE ACCIDENT.

THE journey was continued in profound silence; for the nobleman did not choose to converse with his hireling assassins—and the two men themselves, overcome with weariness, soon fell into a profound slumber. Even when the carriage stopped to change horses, they did not wake up: but at length they were aroused by some one shaking them violently—and then they found that several hours must have passed away. For the blinds were down—the misty grey light of the dawn was throwing a sort of half

relief upon the tall buildings of a town at a short distance—and the vehicle was standing at the door of a small cottage, not half so comfortable-looking as the one which had previously afforded the men such good cheer.

The nobleman it was who had aroused his followers; and they all alighted at this dwelling, the only inhabitant of which appeared to be a very aged, but bustling, active woman, remarkably clean though homely in her apparel. She conducted them into her cottage, where the table was already spread for breakfast; and it therefore struck both the Magsman and Beggarman that their presence was not unexpected. This idea was confirmed, when the nobleman, bidding them follow him up-stairs, conducted them to a chamber where he showed them two trunks full of clothing, observing at the same time, "Here is a complete wardrobe for each of you: so that the instant we reach Liverpool you will have nothing to do but to step on board a ship which will sail immediately afterwards. But you will do well to throw aside the apparel you now have on, and dress yourselves in the garments provided for you. In a word, it will be prudent to make yourselves look as decent and respectable as possible."

Having thus spoken, the masked unknown quitted the chamber, closing the door behind him.

"Well, I'm blowed if things ain't done by magic now-a-days," said the Magsman. "In the first place a carriage was ready waiting for us the night before last when we met our employer in Hyde Park: then, when we reached the bridge, yesterday morning, the lady had nothing to do but walk up to a house and lead forth her victim just for all the world as if she carried a wand which he was bound to obey. Next we are whirled away to a cottage where a comfortable old couple have got everything nice and in readiness to entertain us. At night, a bag is furnished with every implement necessary for the visit to the church-vault—even to the very keys that are to open the church-doors themselves. And now we come this morning to another cottage, where breakfast is ready to serve up, and where a couple of trunks full of all kinds of toggery are waiting for us."

"It looks like a fairy tale, Joe," said the Beggarman. "But instead of troubling ourselves about how the trunks and the toggery come here, let us inspect the first and try on the last."

"So we will," observed the Magsman.

The examination of the boxes accordingly commenced; and in each one were found two suits of clothes, shirts, stockings, handkerchiefs, hair-brushes, combs, shaving-tackle, boots—in fine, everything necessary for the outfit of men who were about to undertake a tolerably long voyage. The clothing was of good but plain materials, and was of that kind which a respectable artizan or operative would purchase.

"Well," ejaculated the Big Beggarman, at last breaking the long silence which had prevailed during the inspection of the various articles: "as sure as my name is Stephen Price, I mean to transmogrify myself in a jiffey. I've taken a sudden fit of cleanliness into my head—and I'll see if I can't make myself look a little respectable."

"You'll never look anything else but a gallows'-bird," said the Magsman, with a coarse laugh.

"Well, Joe," was the retort, "whenever I mount the scaffold, you won't be many paces either before or behind me—and the same funeral service will do for us both. But here is a capital razor; and I mean to have a good shave on the chin at present, whether or not Jack Ketch shall hereafter have the handling of my throat."

The two men proceeded to perform their toilette; and having washed and shaven themselves, they each put on clean linen and a new suit of clothes.

"Somehow or another, I don't feel comfortable when togged off in this fashion," said the Magsman, as he surveyed himself in a little looking-glass that hung to the whitewashed wall of the humble chamber. "You know that even when I've had hundreds of pounds in my pocket, I've never put myself out of the way to look clean or decent; and an old rough coat has always pleased me better than a new one. The fact is, Stephen, respectability don't suit me."

"And I never liked it until now," responded the Big Beggarman. "But I mean to give it a fair trial for a short time."

"I'm afraid you're too ugly, Stephen, to play your new part properly," observed the Magsman, chuckling at the compliment which he thus paid his associate. "But let's go down stairs and see if breakfast's ready: for I'm as hungry as if I hadn't had anything to eat for a month past."

"Come along, then," said the Beggarman;—and they descended accordingly.

In the room below, the masked unknown was already partaking of coffee at a side table; and the old woman hastened to serve up a copious repast to the two men, who did speedy and ample justice to the fare.

The nobleman glanced towards them to assure himself that they had obeyed his instructions and rendered themselves as decent and respectable-looking as possible: and, being satisfied on that point, he said to the old woman, "Have the goodness to pack up the two trunks without delay, so that they may be in readiness by the time the carriage returns with the fresh horses."

"Yes, my lord," responded the old crone, dropping a curtsey.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the nobleman, instantaneously perceiving that the quick ears of the Magsman and Beggarman had caught those tell-tale words which betrayed his rank: and starting from his seat, he walked once or twice, hastily and evidently in great irritation, up and down the room.

"I beg pardon—sir—my——" stammered the old woman, comprehending the fatal error which she had committed by allowing her tongue to give such glib and ready utterance to the sounding distinction of "My lord."

"Begone—and do as I have commanded you," said the unknown, pointing imperiously towards the staircase, up which the old woman hurried with an agility that was truly marvellous for one of such advanced age as she evidently was.

The Magsman and Beggarman proceeded with their breakfast as if nothing extraordinary had happened, and forebore from any remark on the little incident which had just revealed to them the fact that their employer was of aristocratic rank: for it will be remembered that although the readers have all along been aware that the masked unknown was a nobleman, his dialogue with Mrs. Brace on the night of the Magsman's intrusion having caused that circumstance to transpire—yet that the two ruffians now became acquainted with it for the first time.

But in spite of the seeming air of indifference with which they continued to attack the copious fare set before them, it had been evident to the nobleman at the first glance which he cast towards them as the fatal "My lord" fell from the old woman's lips, that their ears had not failed to catch the words: and he could scarcely control even within moderate bounds the rage which he experienced towards the crone whose inadvertence had thus betrayed his rank. But he soon began to reflect that although his hireling assassins had learnt that he was *a lord*, they were still in utter ignorance of *his title*; and consoling himself with this fact, he thought it prudent not to condescend to the slightest remark on the occurrence. He even spoke in a civil and conciliatory manner to the old woman when she returned to the room—evidently for the purpose of soothing her feelings for the irritation he had previously shown.

The Magsman and the Beggarman, having finished their breakfast, were desired by the nobleman to fetch down their trunks, which the crone had packed up for them; and, on ascending to the chamber for this purpose, Joe Warren observed in a low whisper and with a significant look, "Wasn't I right, my good feller, when I made up my mind not to knock this niblike cove on the head? Now we've discovered that he's a lord—and it's probable the lady that was with us all the night before last is of high rank also. Let me tell you, Stephen, that this is as pleasant and promising an affair as we have ever had in hand."

"And we'll make the most of it, Joe," responded the Big Beggarman. "It ought to prove as good as an annuity for us."

Having thus exchanged their sentiments, the two ruffians shouldered their trunks and descended to the ground-floor again. The carriage, which had driven away to change horses during breakfast time, returned in a few minutes; and the men lashed their luggage on to the roof. They then entered the vehicle—the nobleman followed them—the blinds were drawn up once more—and the journey was continued at a rapid rate.

Between three and four hours passed away, during which the horses had been changed twice,—when the carriage suddenly broke down as it was whirling speedily on. The nobleman instantly put down the blinds—opened the door—and leapt out; and a glance at the fore axle-tree, which had snapped in halves, convinced him that some hours must elapse ere the accident could be repaired.

Having consulted with the postilion for a few moments, he returned to the carriage-door and desired the two men to alight. Then drawing them aside beyond ear-shot of the post-boy, he said, "You perceive that our journey has experienced an interruption; and we must therefore part company at once. Those buildings which rise above yonder trees, belong to the town of Warrington; and Liverpool is only seventeen or eighteen miles distant from that place. You will proceed thither without delay; and on arriving at Liverpool, inquire for the *Royal George* brig. You will find the captain on board; and upon your telling him that your names are Jones and Thompson, he will instantly assign you to the berths which have been already engaged and paid for on your account."

"All that is easy enough," said the Magsman; "and the arrangements have no doubt been made in capital style. But who's to pay us the other fifteen hundred a-piece which is still due! No offence, my lord—but——"

"Silence!" ejaculated the nobleman, imperiously. "You have surely had sufficient proofs of my generosity to be well aware that I am not likely to deceive or defraud you in any one respect. It never was my intention to accompany you all the way to Liverpool—though it certainly was not my purpose to part from you at such a distance as this. But arrangements had already been made respecting the payment of the remaining amount due to each of you; and so soon as you have taken possession of your berths on board the *Royal George*, the captain, who has been led to believe that you are political offenders voluntarily deporting yourselves in order to escape a severer sentence, will place fifteen hundred pounds in the hands of each."

"And if he should prove to be a rascal and stick to the blunt?" said the Magsman, not altogether admiring the arrangement.

"You have nothing to fear, my good fellow," rejoined the nobleman, in a tone of decision. "It is neither consistent with my views nor my interest to afford you any excuse or pretext for remaining in England. The money will therefore be paid to you as faithfully and as honourably as the instalments which you have already received."

"But why can't you settle with us now, my lord?" demanded the Magsman, his tone and aspect assuming a slight degree of menace.

"For two reasons," was the the prompt and resolute answer. "Because I choose you to quit England, according to our bargain—and because I have not sufficient funds about my person to liquidate one tenth part of the amount now due to you. Look here, my good fellow," he continued, in a still more impressive and significant tone, while his eyes, shining through the mask, were fixed earnestly and searchingly on the Magsman's countenance: "you will reap no advantage by being obstinate or attempting to frustrate my will. If you rebel against my authority *now*—why, we must fight it out with our pistols, that's all: and if you kill me, you will not have improved your own position one jot. As for any threats of exposure which you might utter, I laugh at *them* and defy *you*. We will not mince matters: you have learnt, through the inadvertency of a foolish old woman who forgot the injunctions of secrecy which she had received, that I am a nobleman. Well—granted that I am—granted even that you discover what my title is,—who on earth would believe your tale if you were to narrate all that has occured within the last forty-eight hours? Besides, even were it believed, would you not be criminating yourselves as seriously as me? On the other hand, suppose that I were to accuse you of having stopped me on this highway and robbed me of all the Bank-notes which you have *now* in your possession,—in what predicament would you be then? You therefore perceive, my good fellows, that it is useless for you to show your teeth at me; and you had better make up your minds to continue on the same pleasant and agreeable understanding which has hitherto prevailed."

"I'm sure we don't want to quarrel with your lordship," said the Magsman, who could not shut his eyes to the truth of all the reasoning which had just fallen upon his ears. "But you must see that you have got entirely the advantage of us. You know who we are—and we don't know who you are:

you have got money to pay us—and we have no means of obtaining it unless you choose to give it;—and when once on board the ship, we shall be prisoners no doubt and unable to come on shore again even if the captain should refuse to hand us over the balance due to us."

"Once for all I tell you that the money *will* be paid to you—and I can say no more," exclaimed the nobleman, angrily;—"unless indeed it be to remind you of the regularity, the precision, and the forethought which have characterised all the proceedings from the moment we left London until the present time,—and which ought to serve you as sufficient evidence that the person or persons by whom all these arrangements have been so effectually made, are not likely to fall into any error or mistake relative to so paltry a detail in the grand drama as the ensuring to you the punctual and honourable payment of the balance due. No, my good fellows—money is not such an object to me as to render it necessary that I should cheat you, or suffer you to be cheated. Moreover, I may as well observe that the captain of the *Royal George* will deliver you each a sealed letter, enclosing the sums due; but he is not even acquainted with the nature of the contents of those letters, and has not therefore any inducement to purloin them."

"Well, I suppose we must take your lordship's word," said the Magsman, after exchanging a look with the Beggarman.

"In that case you had better lose no time in continuing your journey," observed the nobleman. "Warrington is before you—and you can easily carry your trunks on your shoulders into that town. A conveyance to Liverpool may be obtained without difficulty; and in a few hours you will be standing on the deck of the *Royal George*."

"Come along, then, mate," exclaimed the Magsman.

The two ruffians accordingly took down their trunks from the roof of the travelling-carriage—threw them upon their shoulders—bade the nobleman farewell—and jogged leisurely along the road to Warrington.

While thus journeying on, Mr. Joseph Warren and Mr. Stephen Price discussed their plans and laid down the course which circumstances now rendered it necessary for them to pursue: but as the resolutions to which they thus came will transpire in the sequel, we need not record them now. Suffice it, therefore, to say that on gaining Warrington they entered a tavern, where they ordered dinner; and while it was being gotten ready, they wrote letters to the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll in London. These they conveyed to the post with their own hands, some hanger-on about the inn showing them the way; and, having enjoyed a hearty meal, they took their places outside a coach bound to Liverpool.

The short distance of eighteen miles was accomplished pleasantly enough; for the two men smoked cigars the whole way, and got down to refresh themselves with glasses of ale every time the vehicle stopped.

It was about five o'clock in the evening when they entered Liverpool; and on inquiring in the proper quarter, they soon ascertained that a brig called the *Royal George* was lying in the Mersey, ready to sail for the United States of North America. A boat conveyed them on board the vessel; and, on being introduced to the captain they announced themselves, the Magsman by the name of Jones and the Big Beggarman by the appellation of Thompson.

"All right," said the skipper, who was a short thick set, bullet-headed, red-faced man, attired in a complete suit of rough blue, and with a gold-laced band round his cap. "Come down below mates—and we'll have two or three words in private together."

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman followed the captain down the companion-ladder into a neat little cabin, lighted by a lamp suspended to the ceiling: for as it was now past sunset and the shades of night were gathering fast around, the stern windows looked dull and lustreless as lead.

"Sit down, my friends—make yourselves at home," said the captain, as he opened a locker and produced a bottle of spirits, glasses, and cigars. "We shall have a pleasant trip—and my instructions are to treat you as well as the rough accommodations of shipboard will permit. Come—help yourselves: the grog is good—the havannahs excellent."

"Have you got any letters for us?" demanded the Magsman, scarcely able to curb his impatience: for he naturally considered that the response to this question would prove at once whether the nobleman had acted honourably or had played a treacherous part.

"Yes—one for Mr. Jones—and t'other for Mr. Thompson," said the captain, producing two sealed packets from the locker whence he had taken the refreshments. "Here they are—and I'll leave you to read them by yourselves for a few minutes while I give some orders on deck."

Thus speaking the mariner threw the letters upon the table, and then quitted the cabin, closing behind him the door at the bottom of the companion.

"Well—I suppose it's all right," said the Big Beggarman, opening the packet addressed to Mr. Thompson, while his companion proceeded to inspect the one directed to Mr. Jones.

"Damnation!" thundered the latter, suddenly breaking the short pause which had occurred, during which they had both run their eyes over the contents of the letters. "We weren't prepared for *this*, Price!" he exclaimed in a tone of diabolical ferocity, at the same time dashing his clenched fist so violently down upon the table that he made the bottle and glasses dance with a jingling sound.

"He's got the better of us so far, Joe," returned the Big Beggarman, in a voice expressive of a more deeply concentrated rage. "But what's to be done?"

At this moment the cheerful chorus of the sailors, accompanying the heaving up of the anchor, came swelling and oscillating upon the ears of the two men: and they knew thereby that the ship was about to sail.

Springing from his seat with the fury of a goaded lion, the Magsman tore open the door and rushed up the companion-ladder: but his head came in contact with something that barred his way—he thrust up his hands in the darkness—and they encountered the hatch which was fast battened down over the aperture communicating with the deck. A growl, terrible and savage as that of a hyæna, burst from his throat; and with all his herculean strength he endeavoured to force up the trap-door.

But it resisted his efforts as completely as if he

were struggling to move the most solid masonry; and, baffled, defeated, and furious, he stepped back again into the cabin, where he filled a tumbler to the brim with raw spirit, which he drank at a single draught.

"We are done, old feller—done as nicely as that scoundrel of a nobleman could possibly have wished!" he exclaimed at length, when the stifling sensation of the fiery alcohol had somewhat passed out of his throat.

"So I see," observed the Beggarman, who appeared to take the matter more coolly than his companion. "But it will be a very strange and very unusal thing, Joe, if any one gets the better of us for long together."

"True, my dear feller," rejoined the Magsman: "and it isn't by putting ourselves into a passion that we shall mend the present aspect of affairs. Come—let's drink and smoke, since we're prisoners in this infernal den of a cabin; and to-morrow when our heads are cool and we've slept over it, we shall be better able to discuss what's to be done in the present emergency."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman, lighting a cigar by the lamp that swung overhead.

And while the two ruffians were regaling themselves in the cabin, the anchor was weighed—the sails were unfurled—and the *Royal George* began to plough the deep waters of the Mersey.

CHAPTER XCIII.

ROYALTY'S MORNING AMUSEMENT.

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the morning; and the Prince of Wales, wrapped in an elegant dressing-gown, was seated in one of the splendid saloons of Carlton House, feasting his eyes upon the forms of six charming creatures who were dancing in his presence.

Cheerful fires blazed in the two grates which heated the room: the light of broad day fell with a roseate tint through the heavy crimson curtains; —and the atmosphere was warm and perfumed.

A beautiful young woman was seated at a piano, the strains of which she rendered appropriate to the complete pantomime of voluptuousness which the dancers were performing: for the melody was poured forth in soft transitions from the grave to the lively—from the energetic to the tender, according to the passions or sentiments pourtrayed by those witching English bayaderes.

Dressed in the gauzy garb of the ballet,—that attire, which although so scanty as to leave the form half naked, is in itself so nearly transparent as to allow little scope for the exercise of the imagination with respect to those charms which it covers,—the six dancing-girls had evidently been chosen on account of their superior fascinations to minister to the pleasures of the royal voluptuary.

As specimens of female loveliness they were perfect—glorious examples of woman's enchanting beauty—splendid models of all the outward graces and seductive charms of their sex. And as they were grouped together in the voluptuous dance which they were executing, it was impossible to be otherwise than ravished with the softness, smoothness, and polish of their forms—the gradual and easy transition between all their contours—the harmony of the undulating lines which their busts, their figures, and their limbs presented in every view—the flexibility and grace which distinguished all their motions—and the breezy and floating appearance which they assumed in the performance of that pantomime of the passions.

Now did their eyes, speaking to the very soul of the Prince, produce an effect as if a succession of dreamy and sensuous raptures were stealing slowly and softly upon him; then glances of passion, rapidly and fervently darted, sent a thrill of ecstacy through his heart:—now he experienced joyous moments of melting tenderness as they stretched out their white arms towards him, as if wooing him to their delicious embraces; then, as they gently and gradually assumed attitudes in which wantonness was exquisitely blended with the most seductive grace, he felt the blood course like lightning in its crimson channels and his passions were excited almost to a fever and a delirium.

Again—while the music pours forth its delicious melody—the dancers perform steps well calculated to show off their rounded yet elastic limbs, and rest for a few moments at a time in positions that display their symmetrical figures to the best advantage. Then from these attitudes of repose—so full of soft and voluptuous languor—they slowly melt as it were once more into the gentle undulations of a subdued, soft, and noiseless dance,—depicting all the phases of love's passions and enjoyment by the sweet motion of the mouth, the eyes, the rounding arms, the arching neck, and the wavy, floating appearance of the figure. Thus, enchanting the mind and ravishing the senses, their graceful but voluptuous performance carried the soul through all the grades of sensuous emotion—through all the transitions of soft excitement—and through all the phases of impassioned rapture.

For these six beauteous votaries of the Terpsichorean art appealed to the sense rather than broke abruptly upon it,—insinuated the soft witchery of their own loveliness and the magic tenderness of their performance, rather than excited the passions all in a moment; and in the same way that a liquid and silver voice steals deliciously upon the ear, while a shrill exclamation would only startle and annoy,—so did the united charms of the dancers and their dance gradually enthral the feelings of the Prince in the bliss of an elysian dream.

He beheld before him no unfeminine vaulting—no childish spinning and whirling with lightning speed —no uncouth distortion of limb threatening dislocation, and producing an unpleasant effect upon the spectator:—but all was softness of motion—gentleness of undulation—and gracefulness of attitude,—as if a melting poesy and a flowing rhythm were applied to gesture in order to express the warmth of sentiment, the sunny glow of passion, and the fervid rapture of ecstatic enjoyment.

By thus avoiding all rapid, thrilling, and exhausting successions of violent action, the six dancers were enabled to throw a profoundly sensual and a deliciously seductive power alike into their countenances and their movements; so that now their eyes swam in liquid wantonness as by their attitudes they permitted the licentious looks of the Prince to feast upon their swelling bosoms,—then, ere his gaze was even half-satiated, they resumed the slow and undulating movements which displayed the finished form of their limbs and the rich contours of their

[THE PRINCESSES SOPHIA AND AMELIA.]

fine persons: now they would pause again to exhibit their capacity for grace of attitude,—then, gently awakening into life again, they produced an effect as of harmonious feelings in the mind, apart from the real music which stole in all the soft richness of the piano's melody upon the ear.

Not only was there grace in the performance of the dancers, but likewise intellectuality and refinement. In depicting the feelings and tender delights of love, they put forth all their most seducing power and gave a new charm to every attitude of the body, every movement of the limbs, and every expression of the countenance. Juvenile lightness and freshness were subdued into a soft sensuousness that appealed to the imagination, enabling it not only to feast itself upon the charms which were exposed, but likewise to revel in the beauties that were hidden.

And, oh! the licentious Prince both feasted and revelled in the spectacle thus provided for his morning's diversion: and when he was actually surfeited with the excess of that bliss which his prurient imagination had conjured up, he bade the music and the dancing cease, in order that the young females might congregate around him and enhance by means of sparkling champagne the excitement to which the general feeling was already worked up.

And now—even at this early hour—commenced a revel in which the heir-apparent to the British throne was the hero, and a bevy of ballet-girls the heroines,—a revel in which *he* laid aside all the little dignity which his mind possessed, and *they* forgot all the trifling amount of modesty which a profligate career had left them.

With one of these charming syrens upon each knee, the Prince of Wales gave unbridled license to his tongue; and the conversation which ensued would have disgraced a brothel. The champagne flowed freely; and the more frequent grew the libations, the more unblushingly was the disguise of language torn from the lascivious ideas which ein-

culated as unrestrainedly as the wine. The Prince pressed his lips, hot with the breath of lust, to the rich red mouths that were moistened with the generous juice of the grape; and on his fevered brow and burning cheeks those courtezans of the Opera imprinted their harlot kisses.

Presently the musician, obedient to a signal which he gave her, returned to the piano: and while the glorious instrument was made to desecrate itself by pouring forth its rich strains in a libidinous measure, the dancing-girls united their voices in the obscene air to which it belonged.

The orgie was thus at its height—and the Prince of Wales was joining in the ribald song,—when the door was suddenly thrown open, and a page announced—"The King!"

Heavens! what a scene of confusion instantaneously followed—and what a spectacle was this to greet the eyes of a monarch and a father!

The musician sprang with a shriek from the piano—the two girls started with responsive screams from the knees of the Prince—the rest fluttered round the table, not knowing how to act and wishing the floor would open and swallow them up: here a champagne-glass was dropped and broken—there a bottle was overturned with a clattering din—and a fruit-dish, being upset in the hurry and bewilderment of the scene, scattered its contents upon the floor.

King George III stood aghast! The consternation of mingled horror and amazement was expressed upon his naturally stolid countenance—his hands were spread out fan-like from his wrists—his eye-balls glared wildly—and his whole attitude was so absurd in its indignation, that, were he not the British Sovereign, he would have been saluted with peals of laughter instead of received with looks of dismay.

The Prince of Wales was for a few moments so astounded by this sudden apparition of his august father that he remained transfixed to his seat, staring vacantly upon him: but suddenly recovering some portion of his presence of mind, he started up and waved his hand imperiously to the ballet-girls to withdraw. This tacit but unmistakable command recalled *them* also from their bewilderment and confusion: and, as if seized with a panic terror, they rushed towards the door communicating with an inner room,—their gauze drapery fluttering airily—their supple and exquisitely formed limbs moving glancingly, and the nymph-like lightness of their forms acquiring a seeming appearance, as they fled—or rather flew—like a bevy of affrighted fairies from the presence of some uncouth mortal who had intruded upon their sacred retreat.

The apartment was thus cleared of the courtezans of the Opera—and the Prince of Wales found himself alone with the King: for the page who escorted his Majesty thither, had prudently retired the moment he caught a glimpse of the aspect of affairs.

Covered with shame—half tipsy with the generous juice of Epernay which he had imbibed—and not knowing whether to assume an air of contrition or defiance, the Prince of Wales stood balancing himself by holding on to the back of the chair whence he had risen, and gazing vacantly on the countenance of the King who was looking fully as stupidly at him.

"Dreadful—horrible—dreadful!" at length ejaculated the monarch. "I couldn't have believed it, George—I couldn't have believed it. Knew you were wild—but didn't think you were so bad as this: no—didn't think it for a moment. Wouldn't have believed it if any one had told me so. But I can't stop in this room—no, not in this room. It smells of wine and orgies—and drunken dissipation—and all that kind of thing. Come, sir—lead me elsewhere, that I may speak a few words without having my nose offended—nose offended," reiterated his Majesty, applying his forefinger and thumb to his nasal promontory and holding the lip with an expression of deep disgust.

"Be pleased to walk this way, sire," said the Prince of Wales, endeavouring with all his might to steady both his legs and his ideas: but feeling that he was scarcely able to keep upon the former and that the latter were whirling in chaotic confusion, he muttered to himself, as he threw open the door by which the King had originally entered the room, "It's no use—I'm as drunk as damnation!"

"Eh!—what? what?" ejaculated his Majesty, turning sharply and suddenly round just as he was crossing the threshold: "what was that you said, sir—eh?"

"I ventured to observe, sire," answered the Prince, endeavouring to look as sober as he could,—"that our little revel deserves some extenuation."

"Ah!—ah!—yes—I caught the *ation*," cried the King, looking his son very hard in the face; "but I thought that it formed part of some other word. Well—and what excuse have you—eh?—what excuse——"

"Simply, most revered sire," returned the Prince, assuming all the vacant gravity of semi-intoxication, —"simply that these young ladies had come to sing '*God save the King!*' which we were indeed practising at the moment when your Majesty broke in upon us: and the music of the national anthem—hic—had filled us to such a pitch of loyalty, that we were obliged to drink your Majesty's health in bumpers."

"Hem! well—it may be so—it may be so," said the King, surveying the Prince suspiciously: "and I hope it is for your sake. But when I think of it, how was it that two of the girls were seated on your knees, sir—seated on your knees—eh?"

"Oh! may it please your Majesty, *that* was to show me how to beat time accurately," replied the Prince of Wales.

"Beat fiddlestick!" exclaimed the King: but not choosing to prolong this portion of the discourse, he hurried from the apartment where the orgie had taken place and accompanied his scape-grace son to another room in the splendid mansion.

Gazing around him as he took the seat which the Prince officiously placed for his accommodation, the King's eye was speedily offended by certain pictures and statues which ornamented the apartment, and which, without being absolutely indelicate, might certainly have been more decent.

"Hey-dey!" exclaimed his Majesty: "am I in Carlton House—or in a luxurious brothel? 'Pon my word, George, your taste is very vicious—very vicious indeed. What means that naked woman there in the great picture between the windows—eh, sir? Come—speak!"

"It is Venus rising from the ocean, my dear father," answered the Prince of Wales; "and it is considered a perfect master-piece."

"Master-piece, indeed!—master fiddlestick!" ex-

claimed his Majesty. "But there's another—more indelicate still——"

"Helen and Paris, sire," said the Prince, explaining the subject of this second picture against which the King levelled his objections. "Really your Majesty must be aware—hic—that there's nothing indecent or improper in the ancient classics, any more than there is in the Bible. Boys at school read about Jupiter's amours with Europa, and Semele, and Leda, just the same as both boys and girls read the story of Lot and his daughters in the Old Testament——"

"Silence, sirrah!—silence!" ejaculated the King, his puffy cheeks flushing with anger. "I know that you are a voluptuary—a seducer—a gambler—a spendthrift—and a drunkard: but I hope that you are not an infidel likewise."

"Upon my word," said the Prince, his own countenance glowing with a crimson deeper than even that which the wine had painted upon it,—"your Majesty is highly complimentary. This is the first time your Majesty has deigned for some years to set foot within my humble dwelling: and if your Majesty has nothing more pleasing to communicate than to call me a parcel of hard names, I hope that your Majesty's visits will henceforth cease altogether."

"Eh?—what—what? *This* to me!" ejaculated the monarch, starting from his seat, and surveying his son with mingled amazement and anger.

"To you—or to any one else who unprovokedly insults me," said the Prince of Wales, with that dogged, sullen firmness which so frequently characterises a state of semi-ebriety.

"I give you two minutes to withdraw your expressions, sirrah," exclaimed the King.

"I wouldn't give two damns to withdraw them at all," observed the Prince, flinging upon his father a look of mingled defiance and contempt.

"You will repent of this when you're sober, sir—you'll repent of it, I tell you," cried the King, profoundly irritated. "Such ingratitude, after all I've done for you——"

"All you've done for me!" echoed his Royal Highness, drawing himself up to his full height and becoming almost completely sobered by the reflections which that reproach forced upon his mind. "Let us examine for an instant all the wonderful obligations under which I lie towards your Majesty. In the first place, my debts have been paid several times, it is true: but with what?"

"With what!" exclaimed George III. "Why—with money, to be sure."

"Yes—the people's money," retorted the Prince. "Not yours—you haven't a farthing of your own in the whole world. It is all very well *out-of-doors* to et the world and the newspapers talk of the Sovereign's bounty, and such like nonsense: the throne can only be sustained by humbug of that kind. But, *in-doors*, between you and me, my dear father," added the Prince, with a tone and manner of bitter satire,—"there cannot be a more miserable mockery than for *you* to vapour and boast of giving away the coin wrung from the very vitals of an over-taxed, oppressed, and wonderfully enduring nation. So much for the money part of the question. As for the moral——"

"Do you mean to affirm, sirrah," exclaimed his Majesty, foaming with rage, "that I have ever set you a bad example?"

"I cannot say that your Majesty has done *that*," returned the Prince: "but *this* I will proclaim—that my education was as wretchedly narrow, defective, and circumscribed——"

"Enough! enough!" cried the King. "We shall have you announcing yourself as a Republican next, and throwing off all allegiance——"

"By heaven! if every one in the country knew as much of the humbug of monarchy as you and I, my dear father," exclaimed the Prince of Wales,—"there would be nothing else but Republicans. But there's no fear of my proclaiming myself a democrat. No—no: I *wish* to reign as a King—I *mean* to reign as a King—and I will show the English people that I look upon them as having been made to become the slaves and ministers of my pleasures. Yes—since they will have Kings, by heaven! they shall have a true King in me,—one who will grind them down with taxes—trample upon them—spurn them—treat them as lickspittles and menials——"

"You are my own son, after all!" exclaimed his Majesty, considerably softened by these evidences of a due appreciation of regal duties and royal attributes. "The people must be coerced—never conciliated. Once grant them an inch—and they will soon require an ell. If they ask for reform—give them grape-shot: if they meet to demand a redress of grievances—disperse them at the point of the bayonet. The idea that a Sovereign can reign in the hearts of his people, is nonsense. He is their natural oppressor; and they can only be ruled by being made to regard the throne as something powerful, grand, awe-inspiring, and terrible. A madman alone would preach the possibility of making it loveable."

And, gasping with the exertion of having thus made one of the only connected and fluent speeches which he ever delivered in his life, the King resumed the seat whence he had started in a rage a few minutes previously.

"Well," said the Prince of Wales, "I am delighted to think that the little breeze which just now arose between us, has lulled into a calm. The truth is, my dear father, I have the highest respect for you when you don't call me names: because there's something particularly ignominious in applying harsh terms to the heir-apparent to the throne. Moreover, at this present instant I have some claims on your Majesty's favour and consideration—inasmuch as I have consented to give my hand to Caroline of Brunswick, and have already sent Mrs. Fitzherbert about her business——"

"Then it is true that this lady has left you?" interrupted George III, joyfully. "Well!—I'm glad of it. Very beautiful, no doubt—but a Catholic, George—a Catholic! Always remember to keep up the idea that this is a Protestant throne—Protestant throne. 'Tis the only safeguard of the House of Hanover—mind *that!* But what were we talking about? Oh! Mrs. Fitzherbert! Well—you've got rid of her—and I congratulate you. Your mother congratulates you, too: she is well pleased—very well pleased. Pitt told us of it a day or two ago—and that is what induced me to visit you personally this morning. While Mrs. Fitzherbert was beneath your roof, I could not cross the threshold. But now circumstances are altered—much altered. When I came just now—quite *incog.*, mind—I would not allow myself to be introduced with any state or ceremony. '*Conduct me direct*,' I said, '*into the presence of the Prince:*'—and I was thinking what

a joyful surprise it would be for you, when that lewd scene burst upon my eyes., Oh! fie, George—I am sorry to have received such evidence—unmistakable evidence—of the vicious courses which you pursue."

"Are we to return, sire, to unpleasant subjects?" demanded his Royal Highness, in a cold tone.

"Eh!—what? Unpleasant subjects?" echoed his Majesty. "No—certainly not—very far from it. Come—there's my hand, George—let the past be forgotten—quite forgotton. I won't even reproach you for all that took place at the Castle the other day, when your friend Beagles or Deagles——"

"Meagles," correctively suggested the Prince.

"Well—Meagles, then—Meagles—Meagles," reiterated his Majesty: "but, as I was saying, we won't even touch upon that topic. We will turn over a new leaf—a new leaf—an entirely new leaf. You're going to be married—and you must become steady. And to show you that you really have an indulgent father, in spite of——but no matter—let by-gones be by-gones——I was about to observe, to convince you that I will do all I can to please you when you merit my favour, that in the course of three or four days Mr. Clarendon will receive an intimation——"

"Ah! I am glad that this affair has not been neglected!" exclaimed the Prince.

"Neglected—no!" cried his Majesty. "I passed my word to your friend Mr. Meagles—Meagles—Meagles," reiterated the King, dwelling with a species of childish pleasure upon the name. "Let me see—to-day 's Wednesday—Wednesday. Well—next Saturday—but not before, mind—you may cause it to be intimated to Mr. Clarendon that the offer of a peerage and a pension which he will receive on that same morning is a consideration——"

"I understand you, my dear father—and I thank you," interrupted his Royal Highness. "Shall I now order luncheon to be served up?" he asked, by way of putting an end to a conversation which was growing especially tedious to him.

"No—I must take my departure," responded the King, rising from his seat. "And now, my dear son," he added, his voice suddenly assuming a solemn tone,—"let me beseech you to be circumspect in your conduct. You are about to enter the matrimonial sphere—and the eyes of the nation are upon you. Lord Malmesbury is about to set off for Germany in order to escort the Princess Caroline to England. The portrait of her Serene Highness will be sent to you in a few days——"

"My dear father, I beg of you to abandon this topic—at least for the present," interrupted the Prince of Wales, with an emphasis that was marked and resolute even to sternness. "Were the Princess Caroline of Brunswick as beautiful as an angel, I could not look upon myself in any other light than as a man sacrificed to the most deplorable exigencies. My debts—the cruel necessity of a Prince of the Blood espousing a foreign Princess, instead of a British subject—and the circumstance that this alliance is a merely conventional one in which the hands and not the hearts are joined,—all these circumstances afflict me cruelly. Indeed, I cannot bear to think of the marriage which has been planned for me—and there are times when I recoil from the idea as if it were a hideous spectre haunting my imagination. I consent to the sacrifice," added his Royal Highness, laconically: "but let us not talk of it."

"Be it as you will, my dear son," observed his Majesty: and, wringing the Prince's hand with some degree of emotion, he took his departure without uttering another word.

The Prince of Wales paced the room in an agitated manner for some minutes after his royal father had left him: then, suddenly making a strong effort to throw off the gloomy ideas which had stolen upon him, he rang the bell violently.

Germain, the faithful and discreet French valet, instantly answered the summons.

"Are the ballet-dancers gone?" demanded the Prince.

"They departed immediately after the arrival of his Majesty," was the response.

"I am sorry for that!" muttered the heir-apparent to himself: "their presence would have banished the care which now weighs, I know not why, upon my soul."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Germain, "a young lady, whom I have shown to the Red Drawing-Room, solicits an interview."

"A young lady!" echoed the Prince. "Of course she gave you her name?"

The valet handed his master a card.

"Miss Clarendon!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, glancing at the name which it bore: then, after a moment's hesitation, he said, "Hasten and announce that I will be with her in ten minutes."

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE VICTIM OF THE ROYAL LOVER.

THE Prince of Wales repaired to his own private apartment, where he at once adopted the most approved measures to restore himself to a state of complete sobriety: for it struck him as something criminal—indeed, he reflected that it would be adding a flagrant insult to an irreparable injury, were he to appear half-intoxicated in the presence of that wronged and beauteous creature whose image still retained a certain influence over his heart.

Having drunk a bottle of soda-water, he twisted a wet towel round his head, and then entered the warm bath. Issuing thence considerably refreshed, he summoned Germain, and by the aid of this skilful dependant, soon completed his toilette.

His countenance was slightly flushed—but it seemed rather the animation of mental excitement than the effects of wine; and though his brain still felt somewhat heated, he did not regret this circumstance, inasmuch as it inspired him with a bastard courage to encounter the lovely girl whom he had undone.

Taking a last look at himself in the full length mirror, and feeling well satisfied with his appearance, the Prince of Wales repaired slowly to the drawing-room to which Octavia had been shown. Yes—slowly did he proceed thither: for, in spite of the feverish hardihood that animated him, he experienced a certain dread, as if his soul quailed and his heart quaked at the idea of in a few moments finding himself face to face with the confiding young woman whom he had made the victim of so black a treachery.

But at length he reached the door: for a few

moments he hesitated to open it. What could he say in justification of his conduct?—what hope could he give her? How were they to meet?—and how were they to part? Would she use menaces with the view of coercing—or prayers for the purpose of melting his soul? It was impossible to say: conjecture was defied—the imagination was set at naught on all those points;—and even while the Prince of Wales thus tarried a quarter of a minute at the door, his suspense became aroused to an almost torturing degree.

With a desperate effort over his apprehensions, he entered the room; and, closing the door carefully behind him, he advanced towards the place where Octavia Clarendon was seated.

Her face was not immediately turned towards him: it was averted—and her head was bent downward. His eyes swept her form, the attitude of which indicated a profound grief; and a sharp pang—the sudden paroxysm of remorse—shot through the heart of the Prince with the lancinating effect of a barbed arrow. He stood still at the distance of a dozen paces from his victim—and he contemplated the exquisite beauty of her figure with looks, not of lust—but of compassion. Slowly she turned her head: her eyes met his—her countenance was revealed to him,—not in the radiant glory of those sunny smiles which were wont to greet him,—but with an expression so full of sorrow—so woe-begone, that the adder of remorse inflicted a deeper and sharper sting upon his soul.

"Dearest Octavia," he said, hastening towards her and throwing himself upon his knees at her feet,—"I know that you mean to upbraid me—I know that I merit your reproaches! But is there no chance of forgiveness—no hope of pardon?" he asked, in a voice that was deep and tremulous, as if moved by the saddest music that ever hymned the dirge of passion in the human soul.

"O God! what reply can I make?" ejaculated Octavia, suddenly wringing her hands in a paroxysm of ineffable anguish. "I came to say so many things to you—and now that I am here, all my thoughts have fallen into confusion!"

"Sweetest—dearest girl, compose yourself and hear me patiently," said the Prince, seizing her hands and covering them with kisses as he still knelt at her feet. "I shall not seek to justify myself, Octavia," he continued: "for I know that I have wronged you—cruelly wronged you! But I am not the villain you may be inclined to deem me. Dazzled by your beauty—maddened by the contemplation of your image, I was not master of myself: had Satan stood before me and demanded my soul as the price of his services in rendering me the possessor of your charms, I should have yielded an assent. Yes—I, who shall one day be King of England, would have sold myself, Octavia, to the King of Hell for your sake!"

"Great heaven! talk not thus, George," exclaimed the affrighted girl, her whole frame quivering and shuddering at the awful emphasis which her seducer gave to his impiety. "It is true, then, that you *did* love me——"

"Love you, Octavia!" ejaculated the Prince, again pressing to his burning lips those fair hands which were not withdrawn. "Oh! how can you ask me whether I *did* love you, when I love you *now*—yes, at present—more devotedly, more enthusiastically than ever! The love that I bear for you, Octavia, is imperishable? The cruel mandates of an absolute sire and a tyrannical Ministry may compel me to bestow my hand upon another; but my heart will ever be thine! The mystic fires of passion burn at this moment in my soul with as strong a fervour as when I received the first virgin kiss from your lips: possession has not deadened that warmth nor mitigated that glow,—and the flame will burn on unquenchably until the end. For now my cheek mantles and my heart throbs as heretofore, when I press your dear hands to my lips; and your forgiveness for the past and promise of continued love for the future would be the crowning joy of my life—the consummation of all my earthly hope!"

"By everything sacred," exclaimed Octavia, her countenance becoming even wild in its expression—the result of emotions tensely wrung and of feelings painfully overwrought: "by everything sacred, I adjure you not to address me any more in the language of love! O God! my brain whirls—my temples burn as if through the torture of unspeakable anguish—my heart suffers the crucifixion of despair! To know that you love me, yet be unable to enjoy your love—to hear you breathe the fondest assurance in my ears, yet feel that it were a crime to give back the glowing pledges,—Oh! it is maddening—maddening!"

And, snatching—tearing her hands away from the clasp in which his Royal Highness sought to retain them, she covered her face therewith; and the pearly tears streamed in showers between the taper fingers.

"Octavia—my beloved Octavia," exclaimed the Prince, pressing her knees in an anguish which was indeed unfeigned: "subdue this terrible grief—strive to recover some degree of tranquillity—yield not thus to the wildness of sorrow——"

"Alas! alas! with what hope can I console myself?" cried the wretched girl, removing her hands from her countenance and bending upon her lover looks which bespoke almost a mental aberration—so terrible was her despair. "If you had told me that you loved me no longer—if you had confessed that my image dwelt no longer in your heart, I should have been less afflicted! Your neglect—your indifference—your faithlessness would have inspired me with other sentiments—more fierce and wild than poignant. But to know—to see—to feel that you do love me, George—to think how happy we might have been, were you only a humble gentleman, or I a Princess—to reflect, in fine, that no earthly felicity could have compared with our's had circumstances permitted our hands to join at the altar of God,—Oh! it is this—it is *this* that maddens me,—it is *this* that falls upon my brain like drops of molten lead—it is *this* that penetrates like red hot iron into my heart's core! Yes—the dream of love is gone—the morning of stern and terrible reality has dawned on that deep night of passion which was so delicious in its mystery: the clouds are dispersed,—and the light which truth sheds at length is reflected from a broken heart!"

And again the wretched girl gave way to the violence of a rending, tearing anguish.

The Prince sprang from his knees—threw his arms around her—drew her towards him—strained her to his breast—and poured into her ears all the language of consolation which the eloquence of a real and unfeigned grief could suggest. For this

an—usually so cold-blooded, so selfish, and so ouse,—this hardened voluptuary who had scarcely perienced a pang when he allowed his mysmidon drive Mrs. Fitzherbert from his palatial mansion, this profligate, whose whole life was one monstrous otism, felt his soul touched and his heart subdued the piteous spectacle of that fair young creature's cruciating woe.

Yes—he strained her to his breast: and for a few nutes she abandoned herself so entirely to him at those caresses which he at first lavished upon r through the tenderest compassion, began to ac- ire the fervour of other and less chastened feelings. at, the instant that this fact burst upon her com- ehension, Octavia started from his arms—tore rself from his embrace,—and, while her counte- nance became scarlet, her bosom palpitated, and her ole manner evinced a profound, angry agitation, e exclaimed, "My heart is breaking, George—but : me die cherishing the thought that you have ved me not with a dishonouring passion, although honour has been my portion!"

And, retreating a few paces from the chair which e had left, Octavia sank upon another seat.

Her bonnet had fallen off in the half-struggle ich had taken place when she thus wrested herself om the arms of the Prince; and that splendid flood auburn hair which might have formed the glory a princess adored and worshipped as Tasso's Leo- ra, rolled in heavy and shining masses over her oulders. The sunbeams, penetrating between the ch curtains that shaded the windows, appeared to ingle with those luxuriant tresses, imparting to em so fine a gloss and so golden a magnificence at the head of the fair being seemed radiant as that an angel! Alas! alas! though the glory still cir- ed the brow, yet was the angel fallen; and though aven's own blessed light still shone around the head, t had the heart changed into the dross of earth. The rpent had looked in upon the Eden of her heart— id found its flowers rich in perfume and bright in ue—and had changed that fair paradise into deso- tion. The tempter had taught her to contemplate ove as the rose of the soul: she had plucked it om its stem—she had pressed it to her bosom— id the hidden thorn had pierced deep into her art!

And now, as the Prince gazed upon her—while e arranged that flood of glorious hair which swept er her shoulders—he felt that he could not lose a istress so transcendently beautiful: nay—he even lt that he loved her more than he had ever yet ved a woman in all his life.

"Octavia—sweet Octavia," he said, after a long ause—and, as he spoke, he gradually advanced ose up to her,—"talk not of a breaking heart, I im- lore you! There are two persons in this room: nd think you that there is only one heart which is fflicted? By heavens, you do me an injustice!" e exclaimed, in an impassioned tone, as he seized 'ctavia's right hand and clasped it forcibly.

"Oh! your sufferings, George, are light and lerable indeed when compared with mine," said e unhappy girl, with an expression of hopeless isery in her deep blue eyes and on her exquisitely nselled lip. "When affliction falls upon the heads f two persons who love tenderly, 'tis the fate of the eaker to bear the heavier load; and if the sacrifice f a broken heart be demanded, 'tis poor woman's ariable doom to become the victim. Yes—all the wretchedness as well as all the dishonour must be borne by her! Blasted with the lightnings of her passion, she is stricken into an early grave! Oh! these are truths to which Man cannot close his eyes," exclaimed Octavia, with an agonised intonation that betrayed all the poignancy of her anguish: "and yet does he persecute Woman with his unlawful love! Why did you make me your victim?" she demanded, with an abruptness that was wild and almost fierce: "wherefore did you pour into my soul the poison of your own passion? You found me gay, and happy, and smiling—contented and innocent—an untutored creature seeking not the terrible experience of love: and what have you made me?—to what have you reduced me? Where is the hope of my youth? Shivered, like glass, into a thousand pieces that now reflect, whichever way I turn, the hideous image of despair! Restore me to that pedestal of innocence whence you have dragged me down—give me back mine honour! You are a Prince—the son of a King—one day to be a King yourself—and you have power to do more than ordinary mortals: else is your rank a mockery—your might a delusion! Prove yourself as great as the world believes you to be," exclaimed the wretched girl, starting from her seat—half-maddened by the excitement of her over-wrought feelings: "release me from the spells wherewith you have enchanted me—raise the terrible incantation that rests upon me——"

"Octavia—Octavia!" cried the Prince, in a tone which appeared to have caught the infection of her wildness—for the fear that her senses were abandoning her had driven him almost to despair: "I implore you—by everything sacred, I conjure you to tranquillise yourself!"

"Oh! 'tis so easy for you to preach tranquillity," she exclaimed, bitterly,—"you who suffer so lightly! But the time may come, however," she added, with a strange abruptness and an expression of countenance that seriously alarmed the Prince,—"the time may come when remorse shall touch your soul—when the worm of compunction shall gnaw your heart;—and then, although your sovereign rank may gild your agonies, yet shall the memory of the poor girl whose love you won and whose heart you broke, return again and again to torture you when stretched upon a restless couch you court slumber in vain, and when no eye sees you save His from whose presence no man can fly!"

"Octavia! you are killing yourself with excitement," cried the Prince: "and you are driving me to desperation! What means this change of humour?—why reproach me now? Scarcely ten minutes have elapsed since you were almost happy in the conviction that my heart is thine—indissolubly thine——"

"No—no—I was not happy!" she exclaimed, struggling to release her hands from the grasp in which her royal lover again held them. "And if I were, it was criminal on my part to be so! For new ideas spring up every moment in my mind—new intuitions give an impulse to my thoughts. The walls of this room are dissolving into thin air," she continued, stretching out her arms wildly and glaring with terrible excitement around: "the world without becomes revealed to me—the whole earth develops itself to my experience—the human heart is opened to my penetration——"

"Merciful God—she is raving!" cried the Prince,

gazing upon Octavia Clarendon with looks wherein anguish was blended with terror and dismay.

"Nothing now is unknown to me—not a secret is hidden!" she continued, with rapid utterance and fierce gesticulation—while her hair, dishevelled again and flowing over her shoulders, gave her the air of a Pythoness. "A film has fallen from my eyes—a veil has been withdrawn from my mind. I can read my own heart—and I understand yours. I am the victim—and you triumph——"

"Octavia! Octavia!" ejaculated the Prince, seizing her in his arms and endeavouring to stifle her maniac words with kisses.

"Release me!" she screamed, struggling violently. "Your breath is hot—'tis a serpent's venom——"

"Silence!—in the name of God, silence!" cried his Royal Highness, still retaining her in his arms. "You will alarm the house——"

"I care not!" screamed the wretched girl. "Release me, I say——"

"Suffer me to bear you to the sofa—lie down and compose yourself——"

"No—ten thousand times no!" she shrieked, her voice becoming frantic and her struggles desperate.

"My God! do you think that I will hurt you?" exclaimed the Prince, driven to despair.

"Yes—you are a serpent—your coils environ me!"—and a piercing, rending, thrilling scream burst from her lips, as she broke away from his Royal Highness.

Madly she rushed towards the door—it opened violently just as she was within three paces of it—and several of the Prince's dependants burst into the room.

"Let me go!—let me pass!" shrieked Octavia, possessed by heaven only knows what dreadful hallucination.

"Stop her!" thundered the Prince: "I command you to stop her!"

The door was closed instantaneously—and Octavia was seized upon by the servants.

For a few moments she stood still and mute as a statue—and it seemed as if the large blue eyes that now gazed so vacantly upon his Royal Highness, were fixed for ever: but the instant that he began to approach in order to sooth and tranquillise her, she gave a sudden start—burst from the dependants who held her—and threw up her arms wildly.

The menials seized upon her again; her countenance grew abruptly distorted with a frantic expression—and a terrible laugh which pealed from her lips spoke out the appalling truth.

Octavia Clarendon was a maniac!

CHAPTER XCV.

THE LOVES OF THE PRINCESSES.

While this painful scene was occuring at Carlton House, a conversation of an interesting character was taking place at Windsor Castle between two of the daughters of George III.

In a magnificently-furnished apartment, about which were all the scattered evidences of female tastes, the Princesses Sophia and Amelia were seated together in a window recess. A shade of pensiveness was upon the countenance of each royal lady; and in the amiable spirit of sisterly reliance and confidence, they retained each other's hand in a fond clasp.

We have already described their personal appearance; and the reader is therefore aware that they possessed a beauty of no ordinary character. Complexions more dazzlingly fair—eyes more deliciously melting—charms more luxuriant and voluptuous, it would be impossible to conceive. They were the true types of the female portion of the family of Brunswick—precocious in the development of their forms—their countenances indicating the strength of the desires which warmed their bosoms—their lips especially evincing the sensuality of their temperament—and their eyes usually swimming in a soft languor, but susceptible of being lighted up with the fires of the most impassioned ardour.

Of the two, the Princess Sophia was more essentially gross in her feelings and more thoroughly sensuous in her longings than the Princess Amelia. To the former, Love was a passion in which the appetite for gratification was stronger than the pure affection for the object: to the latter, it was a more sweet and agreeable emotion, though still voluptuous even in its refinement. But then the Princess Sophia had lost her chastity and had plunged headlong into the enjoyments of fruition—whereas the Princess Amelia was still in the possession of her virgin innocence, although her imagination was inflamed even to pruriency.

And they both loved: yes—these royal ladies experienced the influence of the tender passion as well as the meanest of mortals: but less happy, less fortunate than even the humblest, and lowest, and poorest of the sons and daughters of toil, they knew that their hands could never be bestowed where their hearts had already been given!

But let us listen to the discourse which is now taking place between them; and we shall acquire a deeper insight into the secrets which, in the confidence of a true sisterly love, they were now revealing to each other.

"I am glad, my beloved Sophia," said the Princess Amelia, who was a year younger than her sister,* "I am glad that some secret and unaccountable impulse prompted us to open our hearts to each other this morning."

"The impulse is not unaccountable," observed the Princess Sophia, in a soft and subdued tone. "The truth is, Amelia, we yearned to exchange a mutual confidence—we felt that it would relieve our minds of a weight were we to unbosom ourselves to each other—and we have acted in obedience to the inspiration."

"Yes—you have properly defined the motive which led to all that has this morning passed between us," returned the Princess Amelia. "Alas! my poor Sophia, you are far more unhappy than I—for he whom you love is already your husband in the sight of heaven, and the father of your child——"

"Hush, dearest Amelia!" murmured the elder sister: "for heaven's sake subdue your voice to the lowest possible whisper when you allude to that tremendous secret. Oh! with burning cheeks—

* In order to suit the purposes of our narrative, we have taken a slight liberty with the age of the Princess Amelia, by making her a little older than she really was at the period (A.D. 1795) of which we are writing.

with throbbing brows—and with palpitating heart, did I throw myself into your arms, my beloved Amelia, and breathe in your ear that fatal truth which involves alike my happiness and my honour! But I do not repent having revealed that secret to you——Oh! no, my dearest sister, I do not repent—for you can now afford me your pity, your sympathy, and your consolation!"

"And I do compassionate you, Sophia—profoundly compassionate you," said the Princess Amelia, flinging her robust white arms about her sister's neck and embracing her affectionately. "In loving General Barth, you have bestowed your affections upon a man in every way worthy of them——"

"No—not in every way, Amelia," interrupted the elder sister, with an accent of bitterness marking the profound melancholy of her tone: "not in every way—for he is not a Prince!"

"Alas! is it not terrible that etiquette and cold formality should surround us as with a wall of adamant?" exclaimed the Princess Amelia: "is it not unnatural that our passions and feelings, though the same as those which animate the humblest peasant, are to be curbed by laws and statutes? Marriage to us can never be associated with the heart's feelings: it must prove nothing more than a cold ceremony—a glacial convention resulting from expediency——"

"Marriage, my sweet sister, is with *me* impossible," interrupted the Princess Sophia, subduing a sob by a great effort. "Think you that situated as I am—being a mother, and with my secret known already to several persons—I should ever dare accompany a suitor to the altar? No, dearest Amelia—it is impossible; and if our parents should seek to dispose of my hand, I would rather throw myself at their feet and confess everything than allow them to confirm any matrimonial negotiation on my behalf. But you, Amelia—you may hope——"

"No, dearest Sophia," exclaimed the younger sister; "marriage likewise becomes impossible for me! I have already told you that I love Sir Richard Stamford—and I feel that my happiness is bound up in this passion which has obtained such speedy, prompt, and despotic empire over my soul. Only one week has elapsed since we first encountered each other under circumstances so strange—so remarkable;—and since then we have met every day," added the Princess, concealing her blushing countenance in Sophia's bosom. "His misfortunes had already engendered a profound sympathy in my heart, even before I ever beheld him; and I was therefore prepared to love him tenderly and well."

"And he knows not that you love him thus?" said the Princess Sophia, interrogatively.

"He may perhaps conjecture that such is the fact," answered Amelia: "but no avowal of the state of my feelings has issued from my lips. Oh! no—it were indelicate in the extreme to give utterance to a word calculated to reveal all I experience for him! Our acquaintance has been so short—and he is so profoundly absorbed in the contemplation of those misfortunes which have fallen upon his head——"

"And yet he must conceive it to be strange that you have thus met him daily since the morning when you first became personally known to each other?"

"Alas! I am well aware that my conduct is imprudent in the extreme," said the Princess Amelia, her superb bosom heaving with a profound sigh; "nay, more—he may even look upon it as unmaidenly—undignified—improper! But *I* never submit to any opinion which he may form, however derogatory—for I feel that I love him more than my own life. He is handsomer, if possible, than our eldest brother, whom he so much resembles; and his sorrows have invested his countenance with a shade of pensiveness which give an ineffable attraction to the perfect manly beauty of his features. His voice is soft and touching, without losing its proper masculine intonation: his form is finely proportioned;—and his manners are more than polished and agreeable—they are absolutely winning. How, then, can I be blamed for loving one who is in every way so worthy of an attachment the most devoted—the most sincere—the most fervent that woman's heart is capable of bestowing?"

"I do not blame you, my sweet sister," murmured the Princess Sophia: "heaven knows that I have neither the inclination nor the right to reproach you. On the contrary, I deeply sympathise with you. But beware, Amelia—beware, dear girl," continued the elder lady, now blushing deeply in her turn,—"lest your love betray you into frailty, and your lot should become as unhappy as mine!"

"Sophia," answered the young Princess, in a tone so melting and tremulous that it was scarcely audible,—"I have reflected well upon all the probable consequences of this love which I have formed—and I am prepared to make any sacrifice and incur any risk, rather than surrender an attachment in which my earthly happiness is so deeply involved. If my only chance of safety be in refusing to meet Sir Richard Stamford any more, assuredly I shall not adopt that course."

"And yet you know not whether your love be reciprocated, my dearest sister?" observed the Princess Sophia, gazing fondly on the blushing countenance of the charming and infatuated Amelia.

"I have already told you," she replied, "that he is absorbed in the misfortunes which have overtaken him. But on each occasion that we meet, he listens with a more evident pleasure to the words of solace which I pour into his ears: he calls me his good genius—his kind angel;—and he begins to acknowledge that there is yet hope for him in this world. Ah! my dearest Sophia, you must not suppose that this love of mine can fail to touch a reciprocal chord in *his* heart! He welcomes me as his consoler—he already looks upon me as his best and sincerest friend—and he assures me that his heart will ever cherish the most fervent gratitude. Oh! there is something sublimely interesting in those interviews which take place between us," exclaimed the impassioned and enthusiastic Princess, her countenance glowing with animation and her eyes swimming in a liquid radiance.

"God grant that you may always speak of them in the same tone!" ejaculated the Princess Sophia. "But there are moments, dearest Amelia," she continued, her voice and manner suddenly assuming an ominous solemnity,—"when I doubt the possibility of permanent happiness for any member of our family."

"Merciful heaven!" cried the younger sister, a strong shudder convulsing her frame: "this is an echo of the same misgiving which has so often disturbed my own mind."

"And I fear that it is not altogether unfounded, Amelia," returned the Princess Sophia. "Our an-

cestors have been guilty of terrible crimes—the records of Hanover and Brunswick could make revelations that would cause the blood to run cold and the hair to bristle up in horror. The vengeance of heaven is now falling upon the present generation of our race—and an appalling sense of this truth strikes upon my heart. Oh! the millions who worship Royalty in this country, little think how unenviable are often the feelings of those whom they thus blindly adore!" added the elder sister, with a bitterness which grated terribly upon the ears of the younger lady. "And do you know," she continued, sinking her voice to the lowest audible whisper, "that I have latterly experienced devouring terrors lest that dreadful affliction——"

"Oh! our dear father's malady," interrupted the Princess Amelia, with a still more visible shudder than before: and then there was a long pause, during which these two young and royal ladies looked upon each other in dark and sinister silence.

"But let us not think of *this*—let us not meet misfortunes half-way!" suddenly exclaimed the Princess Sophia. "God who can afflict, knows likewise how to spare—and His chastisements seldom fall upon the innocent. If our father be undeserving of His wrath, he will perhaps escape a repetition of those trials to which heaven has already subjected him: but if *he* also be criminal in any respect, then may his punishment begin—or rather continue—in this world."

"Oh! let us change the conversation," cried the Princess Amelia, to whose memory rushed all the incidents of that morning when the King was compelled to yield to the demands made upon him by Meagles and the Amazon.

We should however observe that the favourite daughter of George III had not breathed to a soul a single syllable of what she overheard on that occasion;—no—not even to her sister Sophia had she revealed the strange, ominous, and mysterious

events which had thus come to her knowledge. For, although she might unbosom the sentiments and the secrets of her own soul,—yet everything regarding her sire she looked upon as solemn and sacred: and thus the Princess Sophia remained in complete ignorance of those circumstances of which the Princess Amelia had become cognizant, and which proved that some tremendous secret was associated with the destiny of England's King.

Rising from the window recess where they had remained for some time seated, and where the confidential outpourings of their hearts' mysteries had taken place, the royal sisters looked forth from the casement upon the vast range of park and pleasure-ground stretching before them.

"It is now mid-day," observed the Princess Sophia, after a long silence: and, bending her eyes significantly on the blushing countenance of her sister, she said, "Do not remain here, Amelia, only for the purpose of keeping me company. I know from all you have told me this morning, that the hour is now at hand when some one will be expecting to meet you yonder."

"Such is indeed the truth, dearest sister," murmured the younger lady, a sigh of pleasure escaping from her lips. "But you, my beloved Sophia," she exclaimed, a sudden thought striking her,—"have *you* no hope of soon beholding again the object of your affection?"

"Yes," answered the elder Princess: "a letter which I received yesterday tells me that General Barth will be in London in the course of next week—and I shall then return to St. James's palace."

"Will he not ask to be allowed to embrace his child?" inquired the Princess Amelia, gazing tenderly up into her sister's countenance.

"No—for that child can never be recognised by either of its parents," was the melancholy response.

Amelia pressed Sophia's hand in token of the sincerest sympathy—and then hurried from the apartment.

CHAPTER XCVI.

A BRITISH WORKING MAN AND HIS FAMILY.

WE must now return to Camilla Morton—or rather Rose Foster: for the reader is doubtless well aware that the orphan girl had entered Mrs. Brace's establishment under the former name, which she had assumed for the reasons set forth in the letter that she had addressed to Tim Meagles.

A week had elapsed since we saw her hurrying madly along, in that vile neighbourhood which lies in the immediate vicinity of Westminster Abbey: and it will be recollected that we left her at the moment when, a vertigo seizing upon her, she sank deprived of sense upon the door-step of a house.

And where do we find her now? Let us endeavour to depict a scene which, full of harrowing details though it were, was but the type of thousands of such spectacles existing *then*, and of myriads existing *at the present day!*

In a wretched garret a small family was grouped in all those unstudied but painful attitudes which denote misery and despair.

A man, belonging to the industrious class, was seated upon a broken chair; and every lineament of a countenance naturally good-looking, but awfully care-worn, evinced the ravages of famine and the poignancy of acute mental anguish. His form, strongly built when in vigorous health, was so wasted that his poverty-stricken clothing hung loosely upon him—thus rendering him a ghastly object, piteous indeed to contemplate: for it was a being made in the image of God who was thus reduced by destitution, and want, and sorrow to that lamentable condition in which he appeared to be dying by inches.

In another part of the wretched room, a woman was suckling a babe. Suckling!—no—no—that is not the term: for the fountain of her infant's life was dried up in her bosom—and the child was pulling feebly at a withered breast. O God! what language can convey an idea of the shocking appearance of that poor mother and her innocent babe? Emaciated were they both—so emaciated that the woman seemed but the shadow of what her former self must have been—and the child lay with the lightness of a feather on her thin, fleshless arm. Her cheeks were sunken and of corpse-like paleness: her eyes were hollow, with large blue circles about them;—the colour had even fled from her lips, leaving them white as if Death had imprinted upon them the cold kiss of the tomb;—and her entire appearance was so wan—so woe-begone—so full of despair, that it seemed as if Misery had taken a human shape and had become personified in her.

The babe—the poor babe over which she bent, was about nine or ten months old: but it scarcely appeared to have numbered as many weeks. The little being was so emaciated as to be only skin and bone, and instead of having that roundness of face which usually characterises even the infant of tenderest age, its cheeks were as sunken as those of its mother. There was no vivacity in it—scarcely any motion. Dull and quiet it lay—not turning its head round every now and then at the sounds of voices—and never once experiencing the sunlight of a smile to break upon the frozen winter of its sad and cheerless infancy.

And as the starving mother bent over the famished babe, an expression of such rending despair would sweep from time to time athwart her countenance that, although her lips were silent, it was easy to read upon her features the words of agony which she kept repeating in the depths of her heart—"Holy God! what will become of thee, poor helpless child?"

Near her was a little boy of about eight years old, and with a countenance that was intended by nature to be round, ruddy, and laughing in expression. But, merciful heaven! how spirit-broken—how thin—how tortured with hunger—and now wretched he looked! Languid—exhausted—with hollow eyes in which starvation's demon glared—and shivering in the scanty clothes that hung loosely on his wasted frame, the little fellow presented a spectacle that would have drawn tears from a being of even iron heart,—aye, from the eyes of any one save a King, a Queen, an Aristocrat, or a Poor Law Commissioner!

Upon the floor of this wretched garret, another boy—about thirteen years of age—was seated, endeavouring to sooth to the best of his ability a young sister who was between six and seven. The miserable girl was crying for bread: and her brother, as famished as herself, was whispering to her all the fondest assurances and the brightest hopes his fancy could conjure up, but the frustration of

which he was quite old and experienced enough to doubt in the blank bitterness of his own despair!

And, leaning against the wall—pressing her hand to her throbbing, burning brow—Rose Foster was endeavouring to steady those thoughts which were excited to an agonising pitch by the contemplation of the appalling scene of misery that was before her eyes, and in which she also shared!

Misery:—merciful God, every one and everything in that garret bore the impress of misery the direst—the acutest—the most poignant that ever entered the habitations of the oppressed millions of these realms! It was a misery which knew no compunction—no remorse: a misery that was as unsparing as a tax-collector—as relentless as an overseer—as cold and implacable as a poor-law guardian. Although the weather was as chill as if that garret were surrounded by Spitzbergen ice, yet not a spark glimmered in the grate, which was black and cheerless. A candle stuck in a bottle gave forth light enough to bring into relief all the most appalling details of this scene of woe. The flickering beams, playing upon the countenances of the famished family, showed all that ghastliness of feature the wanness and anguish of which they could not possibly enhance. A few articles hung to dry upon a line stretching across the room; and the exhalation of the dampness sent a keener and more piercing chill to the marrow of those bones which had so little flesh upon them to serve as a natural barrier to the icy atmosphere.

Oh! that some great artist could have transferred to his canvass this spectacle the harrowing outlines of which no language can depict with an appropriate vividness,—that he could have drawn Misery eating into the flesh, and sucking the blood, and making its way to the very hearts of those parents and their famishing offspring,—and that, when his work was accomplished, he could have exhibited it to the assembled Royalty and Aristocracy of the country, exclaiming, "Behold a life-like representation of that appalling wretchedness and woe which emanate from *your* selfishness—*your* tyranny—*your* abhorrent cruelty!"

Almighty God! what have the millions done that they should be doomed to endure such hideous suffering in their passage from the cradle to the tomb?—and what have the favoured few done that they should revel unceasingly in all the enjoyments, luxuries, and elegances of life?

But let us continue the thread of our narrative.

The man whom we have already represented as being seated in an attitude of despair, was the head of this starving family whom we have described. The emaciated woman was his wife—the famishing children were his own. His name was Melmoth; and he was by trade a journeyman hatter. But having, at a public meeting of operatives, dared to express his political opinions with a frankness displeasing to the upholders of all the atrocious abuses which render this country a shame and a scandal in the history of civilisation, he was immediately signalised as a victim. The clergyman of the parish denounced him as a "seditious fellow"—and his employer turned him adrift at a short notice. Vainly did he apply for work elsewhere: his name was known in connexion with democratic sentiments—and, because he was independent enough to express what he thought and felt, starvation became his doom in this land which boasts its freedom, its intelligence, and its charity.

Such was the origin of Melmoth's misfortunes. Months had passed since the ban of a selfish and vitiated society had thus been placed upon him; and, although bearing an unblemished character for sobriety, honesty, and ability in his craft, he was unable to obtain employment. At first the little savings made by his frugal and excellent wife were encroached upon: these soon went—and then the superfluous raiment began to disappear. Next, the furniture was rendered available to supply the means of sustaining life;—and the little articles of comfort having been converted into bread, the necessaries followed. Day after day was the shop of the pawnbroker visited by either Melmoth or his wife; and on each occasion the barrier between their family and utter destitution grew less and less. In proportion as their worldly possessions disappeared, gaunt misery became more clearly developed in all its hideous outlines to their view. Every time a coat, or a gown, or a chair was removed from the decreasing stock, poverty grew more plainly visible. The spectral form of famine took larger proportions, in order to fill up each successive gap which the exigences of the day and the assistance of the pawnbroker made in the apparel and the furniture of this doomed family. And every mouthful of bread thus procured, was eaten with a sharper pang and moistened with more plenteous tears.

At length the dreaded moment arrived,—that moment when the four bare walls had "destitution" written in unmistakable letters upon their otherwise blank surface—when the cupboard was empty—when the bedding had all disappeared, and the shivering children slept upon a sack filled with straw—and when only a broken chair, an old chest, and a few poor rags of clothing were left! Yes—this awful moment came,—that crisis whose approach had been marked with shuddering looks and with eyes that could not be averted;—it had come—this fatal phase in the history of poverty and suffering,—and, terrible even in the distance as it had appeared, there was in its presence a reality so stern, so remorseless, so excruciating, and so thoroughly maddening, that God alone can tell what hope now sustained the wretched parents as they felt starvation themselves and beheld their children dying by inches before their eyes!

It was evening—nine o'clock in the evening, when we thus introduce the Melmoth family to our readers. The man and his wife had not tasted food for forty-eight hours: the boy of thirteen had fasted for twenty-four hours;—and the last crust—stale and scanty, heaven knows—had been divided in the morning between the younger lad and the girl. Rose Foster had passed as long a period as Melmoth and his wife without eating;—and thus every soul in that garret was hungering unto death. The man and the woman—the young lady—the three children—and the infant,—seven human beings in all,—were starving—perishing through famine—wasting away with want!

And yet these seven human beings were dwelling in a land teeming with wealth,—in a city to whose bosom the commercial navies of the world wafted the produce of the fairest climes of the earth,—yes—dwelling in this London where the luxuries of life abounded as amply as the necessaries, and where the granaries, the provision-shops, and the markets were stored with a profusion which the promptitude of supply, produce, and import, rendered inexhaustible!

These thoughts swept through the reeling, rocking, maddening brain of Melmoth, as he cast a rapid

glance around and beheld the babe feebly pulling at its mother's withered breast—the mother herself appearing the very image of despair—the boy of eight beginning to whisper, in half-frightened tone and manner, an imploring prayer for food—the little girl crying bitterly—the elder boy ceasing his attempts to sooth her because he himself was now goaded by the poignancy of famine—and Rose Foster leaning in ineffable anguish against the naked wall of the wretched, cold, and cheerless garret.

It was nine o'clock, we said—and Melmoth had not been in above a quarter of an hour. During the entire day had he sought for work—and the invariable answer, when he told his name, was a stern negative. He would have given a false name—he would have done anything short of an actual crime, in order to have been enabled to carry home hope to his destitute family: but that deceit would not have availed him—for references would have been required! And now—beggared, starving, famishing, and with this appalling spectacle of misery before his eyes—he felt for the first time in his life as if he really *could* perpetrate a crime to obtain bread for those perishing little ones!

On returning home—great God! such a home as it was!—on the evening to which we are referring, the almost maddened man had flung down his battered hat upon the trunk which once was filled with good clothes, but which now was empty; and sinking exhausted on the broken chair, he threw one glance of hopeless misery around—and then fell into the reverie of dark despair. No word escaped his lips: he had not a syllable of hope to give—and the atmosphere of that garret was already too cheerless and too redolent of woe to need the breath of his intense affliction to enhance its bitterness. The moment the door had opened, his wife threw one searching, inquiring look upon him: but she read the answer in his countenance—and, with a bursting heart, she bent down her eyes again upon the wan, thin face of the famished babe that lay so lightly on her arm.

Thus a quarter of an hour passed—and not a word was spoken in that habitation of misery.

At length Rose Foster appeared suddenly to receive the inspiration of some hope or to make up her mind to some particular course; and, advancing towards the unhappy man, she laid her hand upon his shoulder, saying, "Mr. Melmoth, *this* cannot continue: happen what may, I am determined to go at once and appeal to the bounty of Mr. Meagles."

As these words, uttered in a tone combining firmness with deep pathos, fell upon the ears of the working man who had no work to do, he raised his eyes with an expression of thankfulness—as much as to say, "Yes -go, I implore you!"—but when he beheld that countenance of soft and touching beauty, and marked the air of virgin innocence which characterised the maiden, he relented from his own selfishness—and, desperate as the emergency was, he said, "No, Miss—I cannot consent to your adopting a course which may lead to your ruin."

"But perhaps you are deceived in Mr. Meagles," she urged, timidly.

"I know, as I have already told you, Miss, that he is the boon companion of the Prince, and panders to all his most detestable vices," responded Melmoth. "This is notorious, young lady - and I cannot be so thoroughly heartless and selfish as to let you run headlong into ruin and disgrace."

"No—we will perish sooner than be the means of having a hair of your head injured," observed Mrs. Melmoth, in a tone naturally soft and pleasing, but which want and misery had rendered weak, plaintive, and tremulous.

"Oh! it grieves me to the soul," exclaimed the young maiden, tears streaming down her cheeks,—"to think that people possessed of hearts so excellent as yours, should be plunged into such an abyss of misery. It is my duty—my bounden duty to do all I can—yes, and dare every peril that may spring up in my path, so long as there is the slightest chance of procuring bread for these poor children! Think you, my dear friends, that I am unmindful of all you have done for me? Oh! no—no," she cried, with the enthusiasm of a fervent gratitude; "if years and years had passed since *you*, Mr. Melmoth, first brought me hither—yes, if many years instead of a few days had passed since *then*—my memory would remain equally vivid and my thankfulness equally sincere."

"Would to God I had the means of assisting you substantially, dear young lady!" ejaculated Melmoth, clasping his hands in the bitterness of his mental anguish. "What I have done for you is nothing. I found you senseless upon the door-step of this house——"

"And while the landlady and the other lodgers reproached you for paying any attention to a mere stranger," interjected Rose emphatically,—"your excellent heart would not permit you to be deterred from performing an act of generosity—of charity—of benevolence."

"Do not speak of it, young lady," said Mrs. Melmoth. "My husband was incapable of deserting or neglecting a fellow-creature whom he found in such a condition: and when you told us your artless tale and it appeared by the description you gave of the Mr. Harley who persecuted you that he could be none other than the Prince of Wales——"

"Yes," ejaculated Melmoth, starting from his seat in an excited manner and gesticulating fiercely,—"when we found that you were a good and innocent girl who had escaped from the snares of the Prince only to fall into the hands of a gang of robbers who plundered you of all you possessed—and when we thus ascertained that you were the victim of those circumstances which resulted from the vile persecution that he had attempted against you—we were more than ever resolved to protect you to the last. For it is the countenance and support of bad Kings and Princes that enable the Aristocracy to tyrannise over the people; and the middle classes especially, catching the terrible infection of despotism and selfishness from the grade above them, grind us poor working men down to the very dust. But what are you thinking of doing, Miss?" demanded Melmoth abruptly, as he saw that Rose was putting on her bonnet.

"Grant me your patience for one moment," said the gentle maiden. "Seven days ago you found me senseless in the street—upon the door-step of this house. You rendered me assistance—you left me not to perish unaided there, as the heartless landlady and the other lodgers would have done—but, though crushed to the earth by the weight of your own afflictions, you nevertheless bestowed your sympathy upon me. Your excellent wife joined you in this

benevolence—she shared in the generosity of the deed. I told you my tale without reserve—and you believed me at once. I might have been a designing, artful girl—and then how your confidence would have been misplaced! But your own good hearts prompted you both to put faith in the poor friendless stranger—and you bade me remain with you. Nay, more—you even persuaded the landlady of the house to grant me a lodging until I could obtain needle-work and pay her— "

"And that work, my dear young lady, you have been, alas! unable to procure," said Mrs. Melmoth, in a voice that was broken by deep sobs, "Would to God that you had succeeded, for your own sake! But heaven alone knows what is to become of us all!" she added, as she threw a glance of despair upon the babe that was now moaning with a low and subdued plaintiveness in her arms.

"I was about to tell you what is to become of us," exclaimed Rose, emphatically. "We must obtain bread—bread, at any risk—at any sacrifice—bread for those dear children at least, if not for ourselves! And if I recapitulated all that you have done for me, my good friends, it is merely to convince you that I am mindful of your generosity——"

"Generosity!" repeated Melmoth, bitterly but not sarcastically: "we had nothing to give!"

"Yes—I have eaten at your expense—I have obtained a lodging on your credit—I should have been a houseless, starving, unfriended wanderer without you," said Rose, with a voice and manner of fervid gratefulness; "and I cannot see your children perish before your eyes without making an effort to save them. Despite, therefore, of all you have told me concerning this Mr. Meagles, I will hasten to him—I will throw myself at his feet—I will implore him to succour you——"

"God bless you, Miss Foster!" cried Melmoth, grasping both her hands and pressing them forcibly in his own: "God bless you, dear young lady—but this must not be! You will only run into the snares of your enemies—you will be delivered over to the Prince——"

"I cannot think that Mr. Meagles is capable of such treachery!" said Rose, interrupting the journeyman hatter. "I have already explained to you the circumstances under which I formed his acquaintance — the kindness which he then manifested towards me—the assistance he rendered—the delicate attentions he paid me——"

"Be assured, Miss Foster, that the blackest treachery lurked at the bottom of all that seeming friendship," interrupted Melmoth. "He saw that you were beautiful, innocent, and artless——"

At this moment the door was flung violently open; and a short, thin, hatchet-faced woman, with a very vixenish look, made her appearance upon the threshold. The young maiden shrank back in alarm—for she was instantly seized with a presentiment of the coming storm; and the children, terrified by the abrupt and unceremonious manner of the woman's entrance, huddled together and began to cry in mournful concert.

"Mrs Thomas," said Melmoth, adopting as conciliatory a tone as possible, "I am well aware for what purpose you have come——"

"Then pay me, if you please," interrupted the landlady—for such the woman was: "pay me, if you please," she repeated, in that sharp, shrill, penetrating voice which usually belongs to the character of a vixen.

"I must request your patience a little longer Mrs. Thomas," returned the unhappy man, in an imploring tone. "You see that I have been unable to obtain work for the present——"

"And never will!" cried the landlady, her voice swelling into a screech. "They say you've ruined yourself by spouting at public meetings and so on—and the hat manufacturers looks on you with suspicion. They think you'll raise a mob and burn their houses down—and so they wont have nothink to do with you."

"Let us hope, Mrs. Thomas, that things will not continue quite so bad as all this," said Melmoth. "It is perfectly true that I have experienced a great deal of cruel persecution on account of my political opinions: but surely—surely," he added, in a tone of deep feeling, "this unjust prejudice must wear away sooner or later."

"Sooner or later indeed!" shrieked forth the landlady, now worked, or rather having worked herself up to a high pitch of irritability. "And am I to wait till doomsday for my rent, I should like to know. Here's twenty-six shillings doo from you — and half-a-crown the week's rent for this young woman here—and not a sixpence forthcoming, as far as I can see."

"God knows it is too true!" murmured the unhappy man, turning aside and covering his face with his hands.

At the sight of their father's grief, the wailing of the children became piteous in the extreme. Mrs. Melmoth, rising up with her babe in her arms, endeavoured to say something to pacify the landlady: but anguish choked her utterance—for when she was about to implore the woman's forbearance until the morrow, the sickening conviction rushed to her mind that there was not a single hope left.

"Mrs. Thomas," said Rose Foster, accosting the landlady, whom her sweet tone and manner somewhat mollified for a moment: "I beseech you to grant an hour's delay before you adopt any harsh measure towards this worthy but most unhappy family. Late though it now is, I am going to see a friend——"

"Ah! a friend indeed—I've no doubt of it," observed the landlady, throwing a sudden glance of cruel suspicion upon Miss Foster. "But howsomever—it doesn't matter to me where the money comes from, so long as it does come——"

"Do not insult this young lady," exclaimed Melmoth, turning abruptly and sternly round upon the unfeeling vixen: "her conduct is above suspicion!"

"Oh! well—I dare say you will answer for her good behaviour and become bail for her character as you have for her rent," cried the landlady. "But them as bails ought to be substaunshal——"

"One hour—only one hour—and everything shall be paid!" exclaimed Rose, writhing under the insult which the woman had so heartlessly levelled at her: and, having thus spoken, she hurried from the room.

There was a pause of nearly a minute, during which Melmoth remained uncertain whether to hasten after her and fetch her back, or whether he should allow her to run the risk which he feared she would encounter in paying a visit to Tim Meagles. But while he was wavering between two

opposite impulses, the echoes of her light feet descending the stairs rapidly grew fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. And still he remained motionless in the room—his desperate condition prompting him to suffer the young maiden to put to the test the only alternative to which hope could possibly point.

"Well, I tell you what it is, Mr. Melmoth," said the landlady, breaking silence at the expiration of a minute: "that Miss Foster has gone away to raise money somehow or another—and of course I'm not obleeged to know or care by what means. It's just half-past nine o'clock—and I don't mind waiting till eleven. My 'usband wont be home till then—and so I've got to set up for him. But if so be the cash isn't forthcoming by that hour, you and your family must all tramp off this very night; and if you wont go by fair means, I shall make free to send for the constable and turn you out by foul. So the matter stands in that there way betwixt us."

Having thus spoken, and without waiting for a reply, Mrs. Thomas hurried down stairs.

Melmoth closed the door behind her, and, turning towards his wife, he read despair in the countenance of the unhappy woman as she sank back on the low seat whence she had risen a few minutes previously.

"Holy God! what is to become of us?" exclaimed the wretched man, dashing his clenched fists with terrible violence against his forehead, so that the blows sounded as plainly as if they had been dealt upon the table.

"James—my dearest James, tranquillise yourself!" almost screamed forth his heart-broken wife, now cruelly alarmed by the dreadful excitement to which misery had goaded her husband.

And the children, gathering round their father, clung to his clothes—weeping bitterly, and gazing up in mingled piteousness and alarm towards the countenance which wore an expression alike strange and menacing, and such as had never been observed upon those features until then.

CHAPTER XCVII.

DESPERATION.

For some minutes the persecuted working man remained standing, drawn up to his full height, in the midst of his children. His left hand was thrust into his breast—his right was clenched—and his whole frame shook with nervous tremblings. Terrible thoughts appeared to sweep across his countenance—and his wife, who was a shrewd and intelligent woman, was seized with the sudden fear that some desperate project was springing up in her husband's imagination or that his mind was undergoing a fearful change, the transition convulsing his whole being.

The little boy of eight clung to him on one side—the little girl on the other—and the elder lad stood before him, beseeching that he would be comforted.

But the man stared wildly upon them; and the more sinister grew the workings of his features, the deeper became the impression in the bosom of his unhappy wife that he was revolving some plan the nature of which she shuddered to conjecture.

"James," she said at length—once more rising from her seat, and approaching him with the babe in her arms—that babe which was giving forth a weak, plaintive cry, as if the hand of death were already weighing heavily upon its frail and emaciated form,—"James—my dear husband—in the name of God! look not thus upon your children! See — they are terrified — your manner alarms them. What ails you?—what are you thinking of? Speak—I implore you to speak!"

"Father—dear father—speak!" murmured the elder boy, joining his thin and wasted hands in earnest appeal.

"What am I thinking of?" he exclaimed, with the wildness and the bitterness of a maniac, his eyes glaring almost savagely as he spoke: and so terribly threatening did his voice sound that the cries of the children, all save the infant, were immediately hushed—and they gazed with mingled awe and apprehension upon the parent who had never seemed harsh nor unkind to them before. "What am I thinking of?" he repeated—and again the unnatural laughter sounded dread and ominous within the four bare walls of the dismantled, denuded garret. "I am thinking," he proceeded in a tone of concentrated bitterness, "that it is useless to let society make war upon us any longer without the slightest attempt at retaliation! I am thinking that I am a coward—a sneaking, paltry, mean, despicable coward—to submit to a diabolical persecution and offer no enmity in return! I am thinking that a civilised society has no right to hunt any of its members to death—nor to goad them to desperation: if it do, it must take the consequences! I am thinking that honesty amounts to a crime when my wife and children are starving around me and an unfeeling landlady threatens to have us turned forth into the streets;—and I begin to look upon myself as a craven-spirited, pusillanimous, degraded wretch who wants the courage to seize upon those rights which a vitiated system denies him. God never placed us in this world to starve: *He* could not have sent these innocent children upon earth to endure all the agonies of that lingering death which famine is inflicting. No—no: it is impossible! We have a right to live—and it was intended that we *should* live, because we were not put upon the earth by our own wish! We did not ask to be born. If we did, then might we be punished for our presumption: but it is not our own fault that we are here;—and since God is good and wise, *He* would not have called us into being merely to leave us in the position of intruders upon the rest of the world. No—I begin to understand things in a new light. We have a right to receive a subsistence from the earth, inasmuch as we have been placed upon it by God himself: and if this subsistence be denied to us—if work be refused when we ask for work—if the bread of industry be withholden, then must we take what is not granted!"

"In the name of heaven, James, cease this dreadful language!" cried the wretched woman, whose powers of utterance had been totally suspended for a few minutes while her husband was thus giving vent to the doctrines which, like new intuitions, had sprung up in his mind as suddenly and with all the vividness of the lightning that awes while it dazzles and is terrible in its grandeur.

"Dreadful language!" repeated Melmoth, bending upon his quailing, shrinking wife a look that

was even ferocious. "By the living God!" he exclaimed, in a tone of wild exultation—his eyes flashing fire, his nostrils dilating, and his whole form appearing to expand into the dignity of god-like proportions; so that this son of toil—this man of the people—this obscure and starving mechanic became an object terrible to gaze upon in the glory of his wrath and the sublimity of his indignation:—"by the living God!" he cried, "I will submit to all these wrongs no more! Patience is exhausted—and endurance has reached that point when it becomes a crime! Whence are we to obtain food save from those who have self-appropriated the fruits of the earth? Who shall dare tell me that starvation is a doom for which we have no right to reproach our fellow-creatures? Against whom, then, must our reproaches be levelled? Not against the Almighty——Oh! no—we cannot perpetrate such a tremendous impiety nor give utterance to such an appalling blasphemy! And yet, since the earth yields enough to maintain all who are upon it, there is a diabolical injustice somewhere when a whole family is perishing through want. Tell me then, wife—you who say that my language is dreadful—tell me in which direction we are to look for the fountain of that injustice. I have already said that we dare not complain against God: and therefore we must accuse Man. Yes—the favoured few are our enemies—the oligarchy are our foes. The bread which by right belongs to my children is now in the mansions of the rich: *they* have stolen it from me! Oh! my beloved babes," exclaimed the man, in a voice of rending agony mingled with savage vindictiveness, "the food to which ye are justly entitled, has been snatched away from you by the usurpers and the tyrants who have monopolised all the elegances of life and refuse us even the necessaries! But this shall endure no longer: I will not kiss the hand that strikes me! Forbearance becomes a flagrant cowardice—and I am resolved how to act. Hear me, therefore, my dear wife—thou partner of my woes and sufferings,—hear me also, ye well-beloved children, victims of an accursed condition of society which blesses the few at the expense of the many,—hear me, I say," continued Melmoth, raising his voice until it filled that dismantled garret like the rage of the whirlwind and the fury of the storm,—"hear me while I proclaim a war to the knife against those whom I regard as my enemies—a crusade without quarter against the oppressors of the millions and the usurpers of their rights—a combat to the death against the miscreants who have made God's earth a paradise for themselves and a hell for all the rest!"

"James—my God! he is raving!" cried the wretched Mrs. Melmoth, now falling upon her knees before her husband—an example which was instantaneously followed by the two boys and the young girl; and, sobbing bitterly, they all clung round the half-maddened man, who still remained standing in the midst of that starving, woe-begone, perishing family.

"No, wife—I am *not* raving," he exclaimed, his countenance suddenly softening into an expression of boundless compassion and love, as he bent his looks upon those who thus knelt around him. "But I have awoke from a dream—an idle dream—the dream that what the world calls *honesty* was indeed something to be admired, practised, and persevered in. Oh! it was a grand stroke of policy for the spoliators and plunderers of the millions to invent that word *honesty*—to proclaim it as a cardinal virtue—to invest it with even a halo of divine sanctity—to have it preached from the pulpit, written in the laws, and advocated by the press,—oh! it was a master-piece of ingenuity for ensuring to the few the safe possession and the secure enjoyment of all that they have plundered from the many. But henceforth I discard the doctrine—I scatter to the winds the morality which it inculcates—and I will become what the world denominates a robber and a thief!"

"Oh! no—recall that dreadful menace—recall it, I implore you!" shrieked forth the almost heart-broken wife. "Add not to the misery of our present condition——"

"Father—dear father—do what mother asks you!" exclaimed the children, in united entreaties of anguished fervour. "Pray do not tell us that you will become a robber. It is wicked to be a thief—and you yourself have often told us so, dear father!"

"Yes—but I was a fool—an insensate fool!" cried Melmoth, driven to desperation and pursuing the terrible current of thoughts which had sprung up in his fevered brain and had acquired a complete mastery over his imagination. "Do not fancy, my beloved wife—do not suppose, my dear children—that I will any longer suffer myself to be the victim of those theories which the rich have invented as a protection for their ill-got gains. They have plundered *us*—and yet they dare to maintain that it would be dishonest were we to take back from them the fruit of their own rascality: they have practised a tremendous system of spoliation against ourselves—and yet we are told that it will be wrong to assume the aggressive in return! The word *honesty* constitutes the barrier with which they have surrounded the accumulated produce of their own misdeeds: and the word *dishonesty* is the bugbear with which they seek to frighten away all those who might endeavour to molest them in the enjoyment of their usurped possessions. They have taken away the bread from *me*—from *you*—from all of us;—and I will recover back a portion of what is our due. They have made laws to justify their spoliation and their wrong; and I should be a coward were I not to set those laws at defiance. From this moment, then, do I proclaim war against our oppressors—ravage against the ravagers—invasion against the invaders—desolation against the desolators: yes—by the living God!" thundered Melmoth, now worked up to an appalling state of excitement, and gesticulating ferociously,—"I will plunder the plunderers—I will despoil the spoliators—I will play the brigand against the titled and proudly-born banditti of this realm!"

And exhausted with the violence of tone and gesticulation which had accompanied this dreadful harangue, Melmoth sank upon the empty chest, gasping for breath and every vein in his forehead swollen almost to bursting.

Then piteous and heart-rending indeed was it to behold the anguished wife and weeping children gathering around that man on whose head lay the heavy responsibilities of a husband and a father,—yes, gathering around him with despair depicted upon their wan and emaciated countenances—extending towards him their thin and fleshless hands—and addressing him in prayers of the most passionate entreaty! The woman held up towards him the poor, frail, half famished babe, as she adjured him to discard the terrible thoughts to which he had

just given such startling and horrifying expression: but the low, weak, feeble cry which the infant's lips sent forth struck upon the father's ears and touched a chord that vibrated with maddening effect to his very heart's core.

"Rise, my dear wife—rise, my beloved children!" he exclaimed, springing from his seat on the chest, and waving his arms over their heads with the mingled wildness and sublimity of a prophet who foretells grand but dreadful things: "you know not what you say when you ask me to become tranquil Are ye not perishing before my eyes?—is not the iron of starvation entering in unto our very souls?—and can I, as a husband and a father, remain quiet and behold unmoved the progress of this work of death? No—no—ten thousand times *no!*" he shouted frantically. "I should be the vilest of cowards were I to see you die thus, without making an effort to save you! To hell with honesty, when wife and children are perishing with want!—to hell with all maudlin morality and sickly sentimentalism, when those whom one loves are going down to the tomb through famine and misery! Look at that innocent babe: in a few hours it will be no more—for your bosom is dry, wife—starvation has withered up your breast! May God's vengeance fall upon me if I endure this spectacle tamely! No—by the eternal justice! ye shall have bread—ye shall eat—ye shall not die of want in the heart of a city teeming with abundance. Again I declare that I should be a pitiful coward — a mean-spirited dog — the veriest poltroon that ever disgraced the noble dignity of Man, were I to let you perish thus without making an effort to save you!"

And, breaking away from his wife and children, the unhappy man — maddened to desperation—sprang to the door. But he had not time to open it ere they arrested his progress — surrounded him again—clung to him—implored him not to leave them—and mingled the most passionate entreaties with the bitterest weeping.

"Hark!" he exclaimed abruptly — waving his hand so imperiously that they fell back as if by a simultaneous impulse—and a dead silence suddenly reigned in the room, broken only by the low plaintive cry of the infant. "One—two—three——"

And he counted on until he had numbered eleven: for the church clock was proclaiming that hour at which the landlady was to be paid or the family was to be thrust forth into the street!

"I will go and speak to Mrs. Thomas," said Melmoth's wife: "I will even fall upon my knees at her feet—I will show her this dying child——O God! would that we were all dead—or that we had never been born!"

And the wretched woman sank upon the broken chair, her whole frame convulsed with the agonising sobs that tore her bosom.

"Wife, listen to me one moment!" exclaimed Melmoth, in a tone which though soothing and kind towards her, was nevertheless characterised by a firmness that seemed ominous and even terrible after all the previous outpourings of his fevered spirit: "the hour of our doom has struck! It was the knell of fate which rang in our ears. Our only hope is gone—for you see that Miss Foster has not returned. This was what I expected—what I feared! She has fallen into the hands of her enemies: alas! poor girl—she has encountered dishonour in her generous resolve to seek bread for us. Now, my dear wife, I beseech you to tranquillise yourself—for *my* sake—for your children's sake! You perceive that I am calm — very calm——"

"O God! 'tis a calmness which does me more harm to observe than even the excitement which ruled you just now," said the miserable woman, fixing a look full of terror upon the rigid and implacable features of her husband: for his countenance wore the stamp and impress of an iron determination.

"My resolve is taken," he answered, in a cold voice that trembled not: "and no human tongue can dissuade me from adopting it. The war that I have proclaimed against the few who have usurped the rights and self-appropriated the food of the many—that war commences this night! Within an hour the first campaign will have taken place. Ere the clock strikes twelve, I swear to you that shall return—and then, my beloved wife—*then*, my dearest children, you shall have bread to eat and money to pay the rent! Yes—by the eternal God!" he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of returning excitement,—"ye shall neither starve nor become houseless wanderers so long as the wives and children of the accursed brood of hereditary usurpers revel in luxury and abundance!"

Having thus spoken, James Melmoth tore open the door—rushed from the room—and was already half-way down the stairs before his wife and children could even recover from the consternation into which this sudden movement had plunged them. But, in a few moments, a rending cry proclaimed all the anguish which smote the heart of the wretched woman—and then the grief, the tears, and the sobs of the children burst forth anew.

Mrs. Melmoth hastened down stairs in pursuit of her husband: but at the very instant that she reached the bottom of the lowest flight the front door was banged violently behind him.

"Holy God! he is gone," exclaimed the miserable creature, pressing her babe despairingly to her bosom, as she leant against the wall for support.

"But he says that he shall be back in an hour," observed the vixenish landlady, stepping forward from the farther end of the passage; "and then he has promised to pay me. Howsomever, as I don't mean to sit up on purpose for *that*, it will do the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Heaven have mercy upon me and my innocent children!" murmured Mrs. Melmoth, in a tone of concentrated anguish: and, without making any reply to the landlady, she slowly dragged her failing limbs up the stairs, back to the garret where the other boy was vainly endeavouring to console his little brother and sister.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE YOUNG MAIDEN'S ADVENTURES.

LET us now return to Rose Foster, who, upon sallying forth from the house in which the Melmoths lived, repaired straight to Jermyn Street. The distance between the neighbourhood of Westminster Abbey and the latter place was accomplished in about a quarter of an hour—for the young lady sped rapidly along. It was not however without a feeling of apprehension that she found herself in the

close vicinage of St. James's Square, upon which, be it remembered, a portion of Mrs. Brace's establishment looked, and into which Rose had descended on the night of her escape from the Prince of Wales.

Upon reaching Mrs. Piggleberry's house in Jermyn Street, the trembling girl learnt with a profound satisfaction that Mr. Meagles was at home and also disengaged. But even while she was ascending the stairs to his apartment, a misgiving sprang up in her mind—for she thought that if Melmoth's suspicions, or rather representations concerning him, were indeed accurate to the letter, she was encountering a peril that might prove fatal to her honour and her happiness in this world. She stopped short for a moment—she was even inclined to turn back suddenly and beat a precipitate retreat from the house: but the countenances of Melmoth's famished wife and children presented themselves to her imagination—and she continued her way up the stairs, Mrs. Piggleberry guiding her.

A door was thrown open—and in another moment the young maiden found herself in the presence of Tim Meagles.

Starting from the chair in which he was lounging—tossing into the fire the cigar which he was smoking—and almost upsetting the bottle of claret which he had commenced, Meagles bounded towards her, exclaiming, "Miss Foster! is it indeed you? Thank God that we have met again!"

The pressure which he gave her hand in both his own was as warm and cordial as his words were fervent and welcome; and as he led the maiden to a seat, she felt convinced in her own mind that Meagles must have been calumniated to Melmoth, who had misjudged his character accordingly.

"Sit down, Miss Foster—compose yourself—you are agitated—you are pale—but you have nothing to fear in this house," exclaimed Meagles, giving rapid utterance to these assurances. "I know that you have been persecuted—but I thank God that I see

you safe again—and I implore you to look upon me as a friend."

"Oh! Mr. Meagles," cried the orphan girl, bursting into tears,—"if I had not already considered you in that light, I should not have ventured into your presence now. Pardon this intrusion—forgive this boldness——but——"

She stopped short—a faintness came over her—and, pale though she was at first, yet her countenance now grew so suddenly ashy, that Meagles feared she was about to faint. Pouring out a glass of water, he held it to her lips: she had just strength sufficient to imbibe a few drops—and the cold beverage revived her.

"Will you not lay aside your bonnet, Miss Foster?" said Meagles, throwing into his tone and manner as much respectful attention and delicate courtesy as it was possible to convey or imply by those means. "You are aware that I have no wife, nor sister—nor indeed any female relative to whom I can introduce you: but my landlady will pay you all due regard——"

"Mr. Meagles," interrupted Rose, now thoroughly reassured with respect to his character, and angry with herself that she had ever suspected its integrity,—"I understand and appreciate all the generosity and delicacy of your conduct towards me—but inasmuch as I come to you as a friend—a sister would fly for succour and advice to a brother—it is unnecessary that there should be any third person present while I converse with you. But you said that you knew I had been persecuted——"

"Alas! poor orphan girl," said Meagles in a tone of deep feeling, while tears started forth from his eyes; "I have indeed heard of the terrible adventure which you experienced a week ago—and I have been making unceasing inquiries concerning you."

"You, Mr. Meagles!" ejaculated Rose, in amazement.

"Yes—certainly," responded Tim, in a tone of unquestionable candour. "From the first moment that I saw you I felt interested in you—as, my God! who would not be, considering the cruel misfortunes which have overtaken you at so early a period of your life? The note which you sent me some weeks ago, gave me pain—because I had hoped and flattered myself that you would condescend to look upon me as a friend. But at the same time I admired your prudence, Miss Foster—and, while I deplored the step which you had taken, inasmuch as it left me ignorant of your place of abode, the good opinion I had already formed of you was enhanced to the highest degree. You now understand, therefore, that I have thought of you often—and very frequently have I wished to know where you were that I might ascertain if you were contented with the new career you had traced out for yourself. Conceive, then, my dismay—my grief—my indignation, when I learnt, a week ago, that you had been made the object of a cruel persecution."

"Ah! Mr. Meagles," exclaimed Rose, the tears chasing each other down her cheeks,—"had I treated you with less reserve—had I consulted you frankly and ingenuously ere I resolved upon any particular proceeding—all that I have endured and encountered would have been avoided. Believing the establishment which I entered to be one of the highest respectability——"

"Oh! what perils have you encountered, Miss Foster!" exclaimed Meagles, abruptly: "for your eyes are doubtless now open to the true character of Mrs. Brace's house——"

"But how did you learn all that has happened to me?" she demanded. "Report says that you are intimate with the Prince of Wales—and it was as an emissary from his Royal Highness to my poor father, that you first became acquainted with *me*. I must conclude, then, that the Prince himself made known to you his unworthy conduct and the manner in which I escaped from him—by adopting a course which makes me shudder even now when I think of it——"

"Heroic girl!" ejaculated Meagles,—"I also have shuddered a thousand times on your account ever since the daring exploit was made known to me. Yes—from the lips of the Prince himself did I hear the tale which excited within me a sentiment of abhorrence towards him equalled only by that of admiration in regard to yourself."

"Was it possible that his Royal Highness knew all along that Camilla Morton was none other than the Rose Foster whom his own wickedness had made an orphan?" inquired the young maiden.

"No—he only ascertained that fact at the last moment—indeed, at the same time that he discovered your flight," answered Meagles. "A letter which you had dropped in the hurry and confusion of that memorable night, and which his Royal Highness picked up, informed him who you were. But think not, Miss Foster, that he was stricken with remorse—or that if he were, the feeling lasted more than a moment. No!" cried Meagles emphatically,—"that man is incapable of sentiments permanently generous or noble; and beware, Miss Foster, how you fall in his way! Let us not, however, dwell upon topics so unpleasant. I was ere now telling you that during the last week I have been making unceasing inquiries concerning you—and this is so true that I have neglected many important matters which demanded my attention. But I knew enough of you to be aware that you are inexperienced and confiding: virtuous and well-intentioned yourself, you are naturally prone to place reliance upon others;—and I trembled, Miss Foster—Oh! I trembled lest you should fall into the snares of the artful, the designing, and the unprincipled."

"Oh! how can I ever sufficiently express my gratitude for all this generous sympathy and friendship on your part?" exclaimed Rose, her voice almost suffocated with sobs. "Alas! alas! I have indeed become the victim of my inexperience—at least so far as my pecuniary affairs are concerned——"

"Tell me all that has occurred to you, Miss Foster," cried Meagles, "since the night on which you escaped from Mrs. Brace's house. I am certain you have endured much—your adventures have been of no ordinary description—for you are pale, care-worn, altered——"

"Heavens! how can it be otherwise?" exclaimed Rose, suddenly becoming painfully excited as the thought of all she had passed through was recalled with terrible vividness to her mind. "Yes—I did indeed trust to people whom I believed honest—and they plundered me—robbed me, Mr. Meagles, of every guinea of that sum which you yourself had invested in my name at the Bank of England. Oh! why did I not come to you? But I sent—or rather some one pretended to call upon you—and I was assured that you had gone to Scotland——"

"Poor girl! you have been terribly deceived indeed," said Meagles. "How cruelly has fortune persecuted you!"

"But I have deserved it all for not having relied on your friendship," exclaimed Rose, with passionate vehemence. "Yes—I have deserved it all—even to the starvation—the famine which I have experienced——"

"Holy God! is this possible?" ejaculated Meagles, starting from his chair and fixing his eyes on the orphan girl in dismay. "Starvation—famine—No—no—it cannot be! And I have been eating and drinking of the best——Just heavens! starvation—famine!" he repeated, now becoming terribly excited in his turn. "Alas! alas! those pale cheeks—that altered mien——Oh! Miss Foster—Miss Foster—how is it possible that you could have endured all this without deigning to recollect that I was your friend? But, my God! while I am thus giving way to my feelings, you are suffering with hunger——"

And he sprang towards the bell to summon his valet to spread food upon the table. But Rose, divining his intention, caught hold of his arm, exclaiming, "I require nothing now—my heart is too full—and moreover, I have left kind and generous friends perishing with want——"

"Command me in every way, Miss Foster!" interrupted Meagles. "Tell me how I can serve you or those in whom you are interested. Thank God! my purse is well filled at this moment—and if it were not, I would sell everything to obtain the means of fulfilling your wishes."

"Generous friend! how deep is the debt of gratitude which I owe you!" exclaimed Rose, the tears again streaming down her cheeks. "But grant me your patience a few minutes—and I will tell you all that has occurred to me since the night on which I escaped from the dwelling of Mrs. Brace."

Meagles reseated himself—and Rose proceeded to recount the various adventures with which the reader is already acquainted,—how she fell in with a man and woman who demonstrated the utmost sympathy towards her—how they plundered her of all she possessed in the world—how she experienced a real compassion and kindness at the hands of the Melmoths—and how she had just left that family not only perishing through destitution, but likewise menaced with ejection from the miserable garret that constituted their home.

"Where do these good people live?" inquired Meagles, again springing from his seat: "I will lose not a moment in repairing to their aid."

Miss Foster mentioned the address—and Meagles put on his hat.

"But I will go with you," she said: "indeed I am glad to avail myself of your escort, at this late hour, to the place which is likewise my home now," she added, with a mournful tremulousness of the voice—for the recent incidents of her life were constantly reminding her of the happy days when she dwelt beneath the same roof with those fond parents who were now no more.

"Miss Foster," said Meagles, "if you wish to return to the lodging which, from all the circumstances you have just revealed to me, I must presume to be a very humble one, I shall conduct you thither as a matter of course. But if you will place yourself in the care of my landlady until to-morrow, when we shall be enabled to consult together upon future arrangements for your welfare and happiness——"

"Mr. Meagles," interrupted Rose, "I have witnessed and shared the misery of the poor family to whom I owe so many obligations—and, as your generosity is about to prove the means of their salvation, I could wish to behold and join in the happiness that you are this night destined to raise up in their abode. Permit me, then, to accompany you," she added in a tone of earnest entreaty: "and to-morrow I shall venture to intrude myself upon your presence again—for, alas! the poor orphan, Mr. Meagles, has no other friend on earth save you!"

"And the sincerity of my friendship, Miss Foster, shall be proved by the alacrity and cheerfulness with which I am prepared to fulfil all your wishes. Come, then—and we will hasten together to the abode of these worthy but unhappy people whose hearts were not hardened by poverty nor rendered selfish by misery against the sufferings of a fellow-creature."

Rose darted a look of fervent gratitude upon Meagles, whose honourable intentions with regard to herself now seemed beyond all question; and they sallied forth together, just as the bells of St. James's church were chiming a quarter past eleven.

CHAPTER XCIX.

STARTLING INCIDENTS.

ALTHOUGH she had fasted for so many long hours, yet Rose Foster felt not hungry now. Hope had risen up in her bosom,—that hope which was meat and drink to her physical being, and animation and excitement to her spirits. Meagles was proving himself a friend—and they were on their way together to carry succour and solace to the starving family of the working man who was able and willing to work, but could obtain no work to do!

A quarter past eleven!—the hour had gone by at which the rent was to be paid—but by half-past eleven they could reach the Melmoths' lodging in Westminster, and doubtless it would not be too late.

These thoughts swept rapidly through the brain of the young maiden, as, leaning upon the arm of Tim Meagles, she hurried along Jermyn Street; and as it was shorter to cross St. James's Square than to go round by Lower Regent Street, she gently drew him in that direction—for the fear of reviving unpleasant reminiscences in her mind was prompting him to take the more circuitous route. But with Meagles as a protector, she dreaded nothing: moreover, her spirits were too elate with enthusiastic hope to allow room for any misgivings or apprehensions.

Firmly and lightly, therefore, tripped she the foot of the pale but lovely girl on the pavement of that aristocratic Square; and the moon, breaking from behind a cloud, brought into relief the fronts of the houses on the southern side and showed her the very window whence she had achieved her perilous descent a week back.

The night was cold and partially tempestuous; and scarcely had the silver planet peeped forth from the dark curtains above, when it was obscured again by the dense and ominous masses of clouds—like a beauty coquetting from behind a black veil. Thus, having allowed Rose Foster a transient glimpse of the casement from which her flight had been accomplished, the fickle Goddess of Night

disappeared suddenly—and it seemed as if some giant hand had piled the dark storm-clouds all in a moment before her alabaster throne.

The obscurity in St. James's Square was now relieved only by the feeble glimmering of the oil-lamps stationed at wide intervals along the pavement skirting the houses: but the walk bordering the iron railings of the enclosure was involved in a far deeper darkness. The evergreens within the iron fence, a portion of which their branches overhung, formed a black shade in one particular spot; and it was while Meagles and Rose Foster were passing through this gloom, in order to make as short a cut as possible across the Square, that a man suddenly sprang upon them as it were from out of the darkness.

So abrupt and violent was this attack that Meagles, against whom the ruffian had directed his assault, was levelled with the ground, where he lay either dead or senseless; and Rose, losing all her presence of mind in an instant, darted away screaming for help and raising the cry of "Murder."

The man lost not a moment in profiting by the deed which he had committed. Rifling the pockets of Meagles, he possessed himself of that individual's purse and watch, which he hastily secured about his own person: but before he turned to fly—and although the rending screams of Rose were echoing thrillingly through the Square—he bent for a few instants over the form of Meagles to ascertain whether life had departed. At that moment the moon shone forth again, and its beams falling upon the countenance of Meagles revealed its lineaments to the robber, so that, although he knew not who his victim was, yet he saw enough of his features to have them immediately impressed upon his memory. At the same time he thrust his hand into the breast of the unconscious man and felt that his heart was beating, though with feeble pulsations: then, giving vent to the ejaculation of "Thank God! I am not a murderer yet," he darted precipitately away from the scene of his crime.

Meanwhile Rose Foster had fled madly and frantically, without heeding the direction which she was taking—piercing screams still proclaiming her terror; when, all on a sudden, she came in violent contact with a lady who, attended by a tall livery-servant, had stopped short in alarm at the rending voice of female anguish which thus broke frightfully upon the stillness of the place and hour.

"Good heavens! what ails her?" exclaimed the lady, as Rose, utterly exhausted, sank fainting into her arms.

At that moment the moon revealed to her eyes the countenance—the well-known countenance—of Rose Foster; and an ejaculation of mingled joy and surprise followed that of alarm which had already burst from her lips. A word summoned the domestic to her side: and the powerful liveried lacquey, raising the insensible girl in his arms, bore her hastily along to a house close by.

A few minutes afterwards Rose began slowly to awake to consciousness; and her eyes, as they opened heavily, encountered the light of candles. Casting a gaze around, she perceived that she was lying upon the bed in a well-furnished chamber, the appearance of which instantaneously struck her as being not altogether unfamiliar. Pressing her hand to her brow in order to steady her thoughts, she speedily recollected the incidents of the night; and, startled by the remembrance that the last event had occurred in St. James's Square, she flung a wild and shuddering look around. A terrible suspicion had suddenly sprung up in her mind; and it was now confirmed most fatally:—for the chamber was indeed well known to the unhappy girl—and the never-to-be-forgotten countenance of Mrs. Brace was bending over her!

A moan of ineffable anguish burst from the laden bosom of the persecuted orphan—and her senses once more abandoned her.

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In the meantime Meagles had recovered from the stunning effect of the violent blow which the robber had dealt him; and, rising from the ground, he leant against the iron railings while he recalled to mind everything that had happened. Memory performed her part actively; and he found that Rose had disappeared—that he himself had been robbed of his purse and watch—and that his hat had alone saved his skull from being fractured by the desperate assault which had been made upon him with a bludgeon or some similarly heavy weapon, the effects of which were still experienced most painfully.

But what had become of Rose? *This* was his principal consideration; and, caring comparatively nothing for the loss of his purse and watch and the contusion which he had received, he looked anxiously all around in search of the young orphan maiden. Vainly did he thus plunge his eyes into the obscurity of the night: her form met not his view. In a hurried manner he made the circuit of the Square: still she appeared not. What could have become of her? Perhaps she had returned to his lodgings to procure assistance. Thither he repaired: but Mrs. Piggleberry assured him that the young lady had not come back. Suddenly it struck him that she might have fled to her own humble abode; and as she had mentioned to him the address of the house where herself and the Melmoths lodged, he decided upon hastening thither without delay.

Towards Westminster Abbey did Tim Meagles accordingly proceed. Although he could not possibly account for Rose Foster's disappearance, and although he felt confident that she had not been murdered nor ill-treated by the same ruffian who had plundered him, it nevertheless did not strike him for an instant that she could have fallen once more into the hands of Mrs. Brace. Hoping, therefore, to find her at the house in which the Melmoths resided, he hastened thither with all speed: but even when he had plunged into the maze of pestilential streets where crime and poverty herded together almost beneath the very shade of the sacred Abbey's towers, he experienced some degree of trouble in finding the dwelling which he sought.

But at last he succeeded; and ere he knocked at the door, he looked up at the house. Every window was dark save one on the uppermost storey; and thence a few feeble rays came forth—poverty's unmistakable rushlight glimmering!

Without farther hesitation, Meagles knocked—not in a commanding manner—but quietly: for he was afraid of compromising the reputation of the young lady by announcing his visit at that late hour in a way calculated to attract attention on the part of the inmates of the dwelling or of the neighbours.

Several minutes elapsed—and he knocked again.

At the expiration of a considerable interval, the door was opened—and, by the dim and uncertain light of the moon, Meagles beheld the wasted and emaciated countenance of a lad of about thirteen.

"Does a working man of the name of Melmoth reside here?" asked Meagles: and, without waiting for the response, he added, "Because I am come to relieve him."

"Yes, sir—he does—he is my father," said the lad.

"And Miss Foster——"

"Also lives in this house, sir. But——"

"She is not at home, then?" exclaimed Meagles, his heart sinking within him as that monosyllabic antithesis to hope fell upon his ears.

"No, sir," replied young Melmoth. "She went out at about half-past nine o'clock—and we've been very anxious concerning her ever since. We're afraid she has fallen into some trouble—because she went to see a gentleman who father says is connected with the Prince of Wales."

"That is Mr. Meagles—eh?" observed Tim.

"Yes, sir—the same," was the answer.

"Well—show me up stairs, my boy," said Meagles, after a few moments' reflection: "I should like to say a word or two to your father. I suppose he is at home?"

"He has been in about ten minutes, sir," replied the youth.

Meagles entered the house, closing the door behind him. The lad led the way up stairs—and Meagles followed in the total darkness which prevailed. At length, on reaching the top storey, the boy threw open a door—and the visitor entered the garret, where the Melmoth family were grouped round the chest on which there were loaves of bread, cold meat, and cheese.

But the instant that Melmoth caught sight of the countenance of Meagles, horror and dismay spread over his own features—and, dropping the food which he was in the act of conveying to his mouth, he staggered back against the wall. At the same moment something dropped from about his person; and the object fell upon the floor with a metallic sound accompanied by the smashing of glass.

"Great heavens! what do I behold?" ejaculated Meagles, springing forward and picking up the object alluded to. "My watch!"—and he held it up by the chain, with amazement and indignation depicted upon his countenance.

A scream burst from the lips of Mrs. Melmoth, as this incident carried to her soul, with the vividness of lightning, the conviction that her husband's temporary absence that night had been marked by a deed stamping him as a criminal!

The elder boy likewise comprehended the meaning of this scene respecting the watch—and his grief burst forth in piteous lamentations: while the other children, alarmed at what they could not however understand, flew to their mother with cries of terror and anguish.

For she had fallen upon her knees—clasping her poor babe to her bosom;—and her eyes wandered wildly from the countenance of her husband to that of Meagles.

And Melmoth himself?—how did he feel? how did he look?

Guilt was written upon every feature of his face and stamped upon every lineament!—guilt was expressed in his quailing attitude—his trembling form!—the whole being of the wretched man was guilt personified!

He had not the hardihood to repeat the account that he had given his wife of the way in which he had obtained the means to purchase the food he had brought home with him and to pay the arrears of rent;—he was not so proficient in turpitude as to be enabled to renew and persist in the tale which he had forged to lull asleep the appalling suspicions that had naturally sprung up in the woman's mind, in the first instance, when she saw her husband return with provisions and money. No—he could not put a bold front upon matters now! The watch, which he had concealed about his person, became the damning evidence against him: and, suddenly rendered a coward by the discovery of his enormity, the unhappy Melmoth stood in the presence of Meagles like a prisoner awaiting his doom from the lips of a judge!

We have already stated that the first sentiment which seized upon Meagles was one of mingled amazement and indignation: but, as the scream of the wife and the cries of the children smote his ear, his heart relented—and he instantly comprehended the entire truth!

"My good woman," he hastened to exclaim, as he turned towards the poor emaciated mother who had fallen upon her knees in indescribable anguish,—"fear nothing—I will not harm your husband—I pardon him!"

"God bless you—God bless you, kind gentleman!" murmured the woman, in a tone of such grateful fervour—such plaintive earnestness, that Meagles felt he never could have forgiven himself if he had promptly taken that harsh step which so many in his situation would have adopted. "May God Almighty bless you, sir!" she repeated, her voice gathering more energy from the enthusiasm of her manner. "Children, down upon your knees—and thank this good gentleman for sparing your father—for saving you also from a disgrace which heaven grant that you do not understand."

And the children knelt around Meagles—and Melmoth himself burst into a perfect agony of weeping.

Solemnly and sublimely interesting was this scene: for there was the scapegrace adventurer receiving the homage due to the good deed which he had done towards the poor working man whom the bitterness of penury had driven to crime!

"Now let us know each other better, my worthy friend," said Meagles, hastening to raise the woman and her children: then, taking Melmoth's hand, he observed, "I can understand the whole truth of the incidents of this night as plainly as if I had just read them in a book. You need not utter a word of explanation. This room tells your tale with a too terrible fidelity," he added, glancing hastily around upon the naked walls: "and if any chapter were deficient in the narrative of woe and suffering, it may be found in the emaciated features of your wife and children. Not for worlds, therefore, would I injure you! I cannot even blame you. By heaven! I would do the same sooner than see those whom I love perishing by inches! And now let me tell you that the gold which you have about you, was actually intended to relieve you."

"Is this possible?" exclaimed Melmoth, sobbing like a child.

"It is true I can assure you," was the response: "and my name is Meagles."

"Oh! what strange incidents have occurred this night!" ejaculated the working man. "But Miss Foster——Ah! something strikes me——My God! —a lady was with you in the Square—and she fled precipitately—rending the air with her screams——"

"Descend not into explanations which may become *too* intelligible," said Meagles, glancing significantly towards the children. "But tell me—do you think that Miss Foster recognised you——"

"No—I am certain she did not," answered Melmoth. "God forbid!" he cried in a tone of almost wild excitement: "I am already sufficiently humbled and miserable enough, without having that crushing idea to overwhelm me altogether. But is it possible, sir, that anything can have happened to that excellent young lady?"

"I am seriously—very seriously alarmed on her account," said Meagles. "When I came back to consciousness, she was gone. I searched for her in the Square—but vainly. What *can* have become of the poor orphan whom misfortunes appear to pursue and persecute with unremitting rancour?"

"Let us go forth and search for her, sir," exclaimed Melmoth.

"It is useless," observed Meagles. "Where can we search? Let us rather hope that some kind persons have given her an asylum for the night, and that to-morrow morning we shall receive gladdening intelligence respecting her."

"God send that such may prove the case!" cried Melmoth.

"I shall now leave you," said Meagles; "but I shall not lose sight of you. As to what has occurred —think no more of it! Poverty engenders much which deserves pity rather than blame; and the good reputation of years must not be considered ruined by the madness of a moment. Farewell for the present —and may better days await you. You will soon see me again."

And, without waiting for a renewed outpouring of the fervent thanks of the Melmoth family, Meagles hastened away. The eldest lad followed him down to the door—and ere Tim could succeed in quitting the house, that grateful boy had seized his hand, pressed it to his lips, and covered it with his tears.

CHAPTER C.

STAMFORD MANOR.

The incidents of our tale follow each other in rapid succession; and the stage of our drama is crowded with characters and busy with action. But busier still, if possible, is it shortly destined to become; and of a deeper and more exciting interest are the events which yet remain to be told.

All that is most horrible in respect to crime—most pathetic and touching in the sphere of love —most terrible with regard to the oppression sustained by the poor at the hands of the rich—and most startling or rivetting, enthralling or attractive, in reference to variety of incident,—all these features have yet more fully to develop themselves in the progress of our narrative.

To scenes more strange than any yet depicted, will the reader have to be introduced: through the maze of adventures still more mysterious and exciting than those already recorded, will he have to accompany us.

As the subject grows upon us, our energies appear to take the colossal proportions adequate to the task of elaborating it: our imagination expands commensurately with the labour which it has to perform.

To accumulate incident upon incident with a rapidity which flags not, may appear to many the Titanian toil of heaping Ossa upon Pelion—mount upon mountain:—but to us it is a task fraught with its own exciting pleasure.

And so will it seem to us until the end!

We must now request our readers to accompany us to Stamford Manor, which, as stated in the first chapter of this history, was situated at a distance of about three miles from Aylesbury.

It was a handsome building—of imposing appearance externally, and splendidly fitted up within; and the fire which had occurred simultaneously with the appalling tragedy wherein Lady Stamford played the terrible part of the guilty heroine, had not achieved any considerable amount of damage.

On the same night when the incidents just related took place, and at about nine o'clock, a post-chaise drove up to the door of Stamford Manor; and Mr. Page, leaping forth, assisted his wife to descend.

Having dismissed the vehicle, which was hired at Aylesbury, the worthy couple entered the hall; and Mr. Page, addressing the old woman who had admitted them into the mansion, said, "You, I presume, are the person left in charge of the premises?"

"Yes, sir—my name is Bryan," was the answer, accompanied by a low curtsey. "I dessay Sir Richard told you to inquire for Mrs. Bryan, didn't he? Leastways, I should think it most likely that he did——"

"My good woman," interrupted Mr. Page,—"I can perceive at once that you are disposed to be garrulous—and there's nothing I like less than garrulity. Your master has written to you, stating that a gentleman and lady would call here this evening—eh?"

And as Mr. Page gave utterance to the word "lady," he glanced complaisantly towards Julia who was decked out in all the flaunting colours which the worst possible taste could have managed to accumulate.

"Yes, sir," answered Mrs. Bryan: "Sir Richard honoured me with a letter—leastways with a note —which the postman brought over this morning from Aylesbury: or I should say the post-boy, by rights—for he's a mere lad of some sixteen, or so——"

"Never mind how old he is, Mrs. Bryan," exclaimed Mr. Page. "He brought you the letter safe —and that's all we have to care about. But this letter duly informed you that a certain Mr. Page and his lady would probably call here in the evening —is it not so?"

"Yes, sir—and that you would pass the night here," returned the woman; "and I was to mind and make you as comfortable as possible. So I've got you a nice roast fowl for your supper—and put clean sheets on the best bed——"

"Well and good," said the ex-commercial traveller. "I perceive that it becomes altogether unnecessary to inform you that *I* am Mr. Page," he continued pompously,—"and that *this* lady is my

lady—or, in vulgar terms, my wife. How long will supper be before it's ready?"

"Half-an-hour, sir," was the answer: "leastways, three quarters at the outside—'cause there's a bit of ham a-biling to eat with the fowl."

"Well, then," said Mr. Page, in a musing tone as he turned towards his wife, who had been admiring the statues and vases in the marble hall while the preceding colloquy took place between her husband and the ancient domestic: "I think we may as well commence our work this evening. At all events, I should like to sort and seal up the papers to-night."

"What's to prevent us?" demanded Julia. "You have heard that there's three quarters of an hour till supper-time—and we may do a great deal in that interval. For mind you, I don't mean to sleep in this house to-morrow night. It's enough, in all conscience, to sleep here one night—with the reputation that the place has got."

"Oh! that's all nonsense, Julia!" exclaimed Mr. Page. "I only wish Sir Richard would make you and me a present of the Manor on condition that we must live in it nine months out of every year: I don't think we should forfeit possession, let it be ever so desperately haunted."

"Haunted indeed!" ejaculated Mrs. Bryan, catching at the word as a new pivot whereon her garrulity had an opportunity of turning. "There's no doubt about its being haunted. Why—after the terrible business took place, and her ladyship died, the servants left one after another, 'cause it was soon knowed that the sperret of her ladyship walked——"

"Trash!—nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Page. "An enlightened man—gentleman, I mean—like me, scorns such silly notions. But how happens it that if her ladyship *walks*, as you call it,—how happens it, I should like to know, that you have courage enough to live all alone in the house?"

"Not exactly all alone, sir," replied Mrs. Bryan: "'cause my husband's with me—and he takes care of the grounds. But if we wasn't poor people and glad to earn an honest penny any-how, I'm sure we shouldn't have undertook the charge of the Manor when the regular servants—housekeeper, gardener, footmen, cook, maids, and all—deserted it in the fashion they did. Leastways——"

"Pray cease to inflict your '*leastways*' upon us, my good woman," said the pragmatical Mr. Page; "and tell us honestly and truly whether *you* ever saw the ghost of her ladyship?"

"I can't say that I ever seed anything, sir," answered Mrs. Bryan: "but I've heerd a many strange noises which has quite freezed the blood in my veins and made my 'air stand up——"

"Why, you arrant old humbug," ejaculated Mr. Page; "you wear a wig! How can you look me in the face, and talk about your hair standing on end? I suppose you will be telling us next that your teeth chattered?" he added, the point of his remark existing in the fact that the ancient dame had no teeth at all.

"Well, sir—I didn't mean no offence," she said, with a good humour that was imperturbable. 'When I spoke of my 'air standing on end, it was what I've heerd called a figger of speech:—or something of that kind. But raly and truly, me and my husband have heerd strange noises at times;—and if it wasn't an object to us to live rent-free, have the use of the wegitables, and ten shillings a-week into the bargain—with the chance of being retained in the service of them as becomes the owners of the estate after the sale,—if it wasn't for all this, I was saying, we shouldn't remain here no longer—or yet have stayed so long."

"Then you know that the Manor and the park are to be sold by private contract—eh?" said Page.

"To be sure, sir. A many gentlemen and ladies has been to look at it. They tell us that the sale's to take place next week," said Mrs. Bryan. "I don't know how true the report may be——"

"It is quite true," observed Mr. Page. "Sir Richard Stamford feels that he can never live here again after all that has occurred—and he wants to dispose of the place as soon as possible. Next week, as you have been informed, the sale will most probably be accomplished. I and my lady are intimate friends of Sir Richard's—indeed, I may say we are bosom friends," continued the ex-traveller pompously; "and he has testified his regard for us by honouring us with his confidence on the present occasion. For I suppose you are aware of our purpose in visiting the Manor, my good woman?"

"Sir Richard tells my husband and me in his letter that you're going to take away all the papers and wallyables——"

"Say *valuables*, if you please," interrupted Mr. Page: "it is more classical."

"Well—how much longer is this nonsense going to continue?" asked Julia. "If you mean to look over the papers this evening, we had better begin at once."

"True, my dear spouse," observed Mr. Page. "Now, my good woman, have the kindness to conduct us to the study or library, as the case may be—and if you get supper ready in about three quarters of an hour, it will be time enough. We will attend to business first, and enjoy ourselves afterwards."

Mrs. Bryan lighted a parlour-lamp by means of the candle which she carried in her hand; and she then led the way to the library. Placing the lamp on a handsome desk which stood in the room, she would have renewed the conversation with all the pertinacity of her garrulous temperament, had not Julia unceremoniously bade her retire—an order which she obeyed with perfect good humour and a low curtsey.

Mr. Page deposited his hat and cloak on a chair, while Julia likewise laid aside her bonnet and mantle; and, having taken a rapid survey of the apartment and its numerous shelves filled with elegantly bound books, they proceeded to inspect the contents of the desk, the keys of which the ex-traveller had in his possession.

"You remember," said Mrs. Page, "that all the correspondence which ever passed between Sir Richard and the bankers is to be preserved."

"I have forgotten none of the instructions which the baronet gave us, my dear," returned Page. "You are quite right—the letters you mention are to be preserved, in case they should be wanted for the winding up of the affairs of the bank. Well, it's a lucky thing for Sir Richard that he will have saved from the wreck of his property so much more than he at first anticipated. It made me quite happy to see him in such good spirits yesterday at Windsor. But what is that bundle of papers you have just taken out of the little drawer there?" demanded Mr. Page of his wife.

"'*Correspondence with my Eleanor*,'" answered Julia, reading the endorsement.

"That is to be burnt—the whole of it," exclaimed Page. "Untie the bundle and scatter the letters in the grate: they will take the flames more easily in that fashion. And here is another bundle destined to share the same fate: it is endorsed '*Miscellaneous*.' By the bye, wasn't it a strange thing that Sir Richard was walking with the Princess Amelia in Windsor Park yesterday? She is really a sweet pretty young lady. There is something quite royal about her—and even before that park-keeper whom we questioned told us who she was, I had an instinctive presentiment that she was of high birth."

"Of high nonsense!" exclaimed Julia, who was busily engaged in burning the condemned correspondence. "How can one woman be so different from another as all that?"

"I didn't mean to pay you any ill compliment, Julia my love," returned Mr. Page: "no odious comparisons, you know—for you're a very pretty and genteel young woman—lady I meant to say—and ought to be a princess. But I was observing that Sir Richard was walking with the Princess in the park, when we went in search of him——"

"And he did not appear over well pleased that we accosted him while he was with her Royal Highness," interrupted Mrs. Page, returning to the table on which her husband was scattering and sorting the correspondence. "Now—which heap is to be burnt—and which preserved?"

"Take these and throw them into the grate," replied the ex-traveller. "The greater portion is to be destroyed, I see. Strange that Sir Richard Stamford himself should have such an unconquerable aversion to visit the Manor!"

"Not strange at all," observed Julia,—"seeing that his wife killed herself within its walls—and that such a mass of misfortunes all fell upon the poor dear gentleman's head at the same moment. It would be far more strange if he thought of ever living here again. But I have cleared away the heap that you put aside to be burnt. Are there no more papers for the flames?"

"Patience, my dear—patience," said the ex-traveller. "I am not quite sure whether we have thoroughly examined this desk. It is an old fashioned piece of furniture—and there may be secret drawers, or what not."

"If there were, Sir Richard Stamford would have told you so," observed Julia. "But as he said nothing at all of the kind, you may be sure that there are none. Now, do make haste and leave off fiddling about with those little drawers. What is the use of pulling them all out in that manner?" she demanded impatiently.

"Because, my dear, I suspect that there *is* a secret recess in this piece of furniture," answered Page, in a mysterious tone. "Sir Richard Stamford may not know anything about it: but *I* am rather a shrewd and far-seeing man, my love—and the more I examine the arrangements of this desk, the more I am convinced that there is some curious contrivance about it. Look at the places into which these drawers fit: they don't go close up to the board at the back. That's quite clear! But here is a sort of false back——Hey-dey!" he suddenly exclaimed; and at the same moment that the ejaculation burst from his lips, the sharp, abrupt, clicking sound of a spring giving way startled his wife.

"What is it?" she demanded, hurrying close up to the desk.

"Just what I expected—and no more than I thought," responded Page, joyously. "A secret recess, my love!—a private compartment, my dear! Look—the false back to the desk has started out of its setting! Who was right in his suspicions—eh?"

And the ex-traveller chuckled with glee.

"Come—let us examine it," said Mrs. Page, thrusting her hand into the recess: but she instantly drew it out again all covered over with the dust that had accumulated therein.

"By Jove! the secret compartment must have remained unused for a length of time!" exclaimed the ex-traveller. "Depend upon it, we are in luck's way! Our vocation seems to be the discovery of important documents regarding other people's business."

Thus speaking, Mr. Page tucked up his coat-sleeve and laced wristband, and thrust his hand into the recess.

"Papers, by jingo!" he exclaimed, drawing forth a bundle of letters much soiled by dust, and tied round with a faded riband. "But let us see whether there is any endorsement."

And having wiped off the dust, he approached the bundle to the lamp in such a manner that the light streamed full upon it. His wife looked over his shoulder; and their countenances expanded with joy at the same moment, as their eyes decyphered the following lines written at the back of the letter which was uppermost in the packet:—

Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford:
together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments.
In the Years 1757—1758.

"That must be the former Lady Stamford—the wife of Sir William!" exclaimed Page. "Depend upon it, Julia my dear, these documents contain startling intelligence of some kind or other. Perhaps respecting the birth——"

At this moment the door of the library was opened and a man with his hat on and enveloped in a cloak, appeared upon the threshold.

Mr. Page and his wife turned their eyes upon him at the same instant: and simultaneously also did ejaculations of terror burst from their lips—while their features became convulsed with horror,—and the packet of papers fell from the hand of the ex-traveller.

For the countenance which thus met their startled, shuddering view and sent the blood with the chill of ice to their hearts, was that of Ramsey who had been hung at the debtors' door of Newgate!

Could they be mistaken? No: another look convinced them that those indeed were the features so indelibly impressed upon their memories; and, with yet louder and wilder cries, they precipitated themselves from the room by a second door opening at the farther extremity.

Away they sped in total darkness along a passage: crash they came against a door, which the violence of the concussion forced open—a light streamed upon their eyes—a shriek saluted their ears—and from their own tongues thrilled the awful alarm of "A ghost! a ghost!"

[THE DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE.]

CHAPTER CI.

ARRIVALS AT THE MANOR.

THE fact was that the room into which Mr. and Mrs. Page thus suddenly burst, was the one occupied by Mrs. Bryan and her husband, and where this worthy couple were at the moment partaking of a salubrious and frugal supper of bread and cheese, onions, and home-brewed ale. The shriek emanated from Mrs. Bryan, who was terribly startled at the violent and unceremonious manner in which the door was thrown open; and Mr. and Mrs. Page explained the cause of their own alarm by giving vent to the ejaculation of "A ghost! a ghost!"

Mr. Bryan, the gardener, who was an old man with a face as red and shrivelled as a wind-fall pippin, bounded from his seat—caught up the poker—and threw a fierce look around, as much as to imply that the ghost had better mind what it was about. His wife set up a piteous moaning, interspersed with such expressions as "Dearey me! dearey me!" and "Lauk-a-day! what will become of us?"—while Mrs. Page sank exhausted upon a chair—and her husband cast a rapid and frightened look behind, to ascertain whether any hideous spectre was in pursuit of them.

But observing nothing, Mr. Page became a trifle more courageous; and, mustering up valour enough to shut the door, he said to the gardener, "Put down the poker, my good man: the spirit has not followed us—and even if he had, it would be of no use to take up the fire-irons against him."

Mr. Bryan accordingly replaced the poker on the hearth, and resumed his seat,—saying, "What was it you thought you saw, sir?"

"Thought!" ejaculated Page, completely bewildered: "by heaven! there was no thinking in the matter! I am not inclined to superstition—I

never believed in ghosts till now—but this adventure has altogether staggered me."

And the ex-traveller began to pace the room in an agitated manner.

"What was it you saw, ma'am?" inquired the gardener, now appealing to Mrs. Page for an explanation.

"Oh! don't talk to me about it," exclaimed Julia, trembling violently from head to foot: "it makes me shudder merely to think of it."

"Dearey me! dearey me!" moaned Mrs. Bryan, rocking herself to and fro upon her seat: "what can it all mean? Leastways, what is it all about? If it was only a chimbley falling, we should have heerd it—or a cat breaking a winder——"

"No—it could not have been imagination!" cried Page, stopping suddenly short alike in his agitated walk and his bewildered reflections. "But let us put the matter to the test. Julia, my dear, what was it you thought you saw?"

"Ramsey, who was hanged," replied the young woman, casting around looks of unspeakable terror.

"Exactly what I fancied!" exclaimed the ex-traveller, feeling that his flesh was creeping upon his bones and his blood running chill in his veins.

"Dearey me! dearey me!" moaned Mrs. Bryan more piteously than ever.

"The ghost of Ramsey as was hanged!" murmured the old gardener, with a visible shudder.

"It was indeed!" said Page, in a musing tone: "and yet this is almost incredible. I am not superstitious, as I just now observed: but what can I think? Either that the fellow has come to life again—or that his spirit haunts the place which is so closely connected with his crimes."

And again did Mr. Page walk to and fro with nervous agitation visible in his manner and depicted upon his countenance.

"You didn't bring the papers away with you?" said Julia. "*Those* papers—you know which I mean," she added significantly.

"No—I dropped them in the confusion of the moment," answered Page. "But they are worth looking after—and, by Jove! I'll venture back into the library, ghost or no ghost! Will anybody come with me?"

"Dearey me, not I!" ejaculated Mrs. Bryan: and looking towards her husband, she said, "Can't you go with the gen'leman instead of sitting there like an old fool?"

"Yes—come with me," said Page: then, tossing down a guinea upon the table, he observed. "There! —will *that* inspire you with courage, my good fellow?"

The gardener picked up the money—put it into his waistcoat pocket—and, rising slowly from his seat, intimated his readiness to follow the ex-traveller to the library.

Mrs. Page sate fast in her chair; and her husband did not think it worth while to solicit her company: but taking a candle from the table, he led the way along the passage, old Bryan keeping close to his heels.

On reaching the door whence he and his wife had so precipitately escaped from the library, Mr. Page perceived that it was wide open just as it had been left; and, summoning all his courage to his aid, he advanced to the threshold. The hurried and indeed fearful glance which he threw into the apartment, showed him in a moment that no one was there: and, considerably relieved, he entered with a comparatively firm step, the old gardener still following and gathering confidence from the fact that nothing terrible was to be seen.

Advancing towards the desk, Mr. Page looked anxiously about for the papers which he had discovered in the secret recess, and which contained the "correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford:" but the packet was nowhere to be found. Vainly did he search amongst the documents scattered about—vainly did he go upon all fours and examine underneath the furniture: that particular collection of letters had disappeared!

"Well, this is most extraordinary!" muttered the bewildered Page to himself: "I am not so foolish as to imagine that a ghost would walk off with a parcel of papers! No—no—it was not a spirit—it was a living man—but whether Ramsey himself, resuscitated by some wondrous and unaccountable means, or a person as like him as two peas, it is impossible to determine. Perdition seize it!—the papers which would have perhaps made my fortune, have been snatched from my grasp!"

But scarcely had the ex-traveller reached this point in his musings, when he was suddenly interrupted by a loud knocking and ringing at the front door of the mansion.

"Who can that be?" exclaimed the old gardener. "Sir Richard perhaps——"

"No such thing!" cried Page. "The baronet is at Windsor, and will never set foot in this house again, I am very certain, after all that has happened. But come along—I will go with you to see who it is, for remember," he added with pompous self-sufficiency, "*I* represent Sir Richard Stamford during my brief sojourn beneath this roof."

"Just as you like, sir," returned Bryan, who had no ambition to dispute the honour with the important, conceited, and bustling Mr. Page.

They accordingly hurried to the front door; and the moment it was opened, a lady and gentleman entered the hall without any ceremony. Mr. Page's eyes first sought the countenance of the former—for he was a great admirer of the fair sex; and the dazzling beauty which met his view completely rivetted his gaze for several moments. But on turning his looks upon the features of the gentleman to whose arm she clung, an ejaculation of mingled surprise and confusion burst from the lips of the ex-bagman: for he instantaneously recognised the Prince of Wales!

Meantime the gardener, fancying that he beheld his master Sir Richard Stamford, was making sundry awkward bows and pulling his forelock in token of respect: while the Prince himself, taking no notice whatsoever of the old man, kept his eyes fixed on Mr. Page, racking his memory to discover who he was. For the ex-traveller's features were quite familiar to his Royal Highness, who could not however for the life of him recollect at the moment where he had seen that thin, sallow, angular face before.

It was quite clear, however, to the Prince that he was recognised by this individual: and, not relishing the manner in which he was now being stared at, he said somewhat sharply, "What is your name, sir?—who are you?"

"My name is Page, at your Royal Highness's ser-

vice," was the response: "and if your Royal Highness will remember a certain night at the George and Blue Boar——"

"Ah! by heaven! I recollect," cried the Prince, his face suddenly flushing with indignation: "you are the insolent scoundrel who dared to address me in a most familiar and presumptuous manner, and to follow me with a pertinacity as unaccountable as it was rude. What did you mean by it, sirrah?—and who are you?"

"I humbly beseech the pardon of your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page, bowing and scraping with the utmost deference: "but the little affair referred to, is easily explained. The truth is that at the time when the incident took place, a reward was offered for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford—and the extraordinary likeness which your Royal Highness bears to the baronet led me to mistake——"

"Oh! now I understand it all!" ejaculated the Prince, unable to suppress a laugh at Mr. Page's expense. "But I thought you were a commercial traveller? What are you doing at Stamford Manor?"

"I have retired from the '*the road*,' may it please your Royal Highness," answered Page; "and having recently formed the acquaintance and now enjoying the friendship and confidence of Sir Richard Stamford——"

"After endeavouring to capture him for the sake of the reward—eh?" exclaimed the Prince, darting a look of contempt on the ex-bagman.

"Your Royal Highness must not view my conduct harshly, without knowing all the particulars," said Page, gravely. "It was I who enabled the baronet to escape from the custody in which certain villains held him—as well as to prove his own innocence and bring Ramsey and Martin to the scaffold. For the present, I am Sir Richard's representative here—and if I can do anything to testify my devotion towards your Royal Highness——"

"Well, the truth is," interrupted the Prince, "I need the hospitality of this house to-night for myself and this lady," he added, glancing towards his lovely companion.

"Heavens! and I have kept your Royal Highness standing all this time in the hall—and the lady too!" ejaculated Page. "Deign to walk this way."

And, throwing open a door at random—for, be it recollected, he himself was almost a complete stranger at the Manor—he stood bowing and scraping near the threshold while the Prince and the lady passed into the room, which happened to be the very one where a fire was already lighted and the supper-table laid in readiness for the behoof of the ex-bagman and Julia.

"Run and tell your wife—and *my* wife too," whispered Page hurriedly to the old gardener, "that the Prince of Wales and a lady are here, and that they must bustle about and get the best supper they can. Come—look alive!" added the ex-bagman sharply, seeing that Bryan was staring at him in stupid amazement.

Indeed, throughout the preceding dialogue between the Prince and Mr. Page, the old man had stood in speechless wonder, gazing first at the former—then at the latter—and then at the lady: for that conversation had made him aware of the astounding fact that it was not his master Sir Richard Stamford whom he saw before him, and on whom he had been lavishing his best bows and salutations—but a "Royal Highness"—a real, living, veritable "Royal Highness:"—and now he learnt, to his increased awe and amazement, that this personage was none other than the Prince of Wales, the heir-apparent to the British throne!

But upon being so sharply commanded by Mr. Page to "look alive," old Bryan felt as if he were suddenly galvanised into all the alacrity of his departed youthfulness: and hurrying off to the room where his wife and Mrs. Page were seated together conversing about the apparition of Ramsey, he communicated to them the startling intelligence that the Prince of Wales and a lady had sought the hospitality of Stamford Manor for the night.

CHAPTER CII.

A NIGHT AT STAMFORD MANOR.

In the meantime the Prince of Wales and the lady had entered the parlour and seated themselves near the hearth. The former laid aside his hat and upper coat—the latter her bonnet and furs; and they both seemed to enjoy the cheerful influence of the fire.

The lady was approaching towards forty;—but as we have already stated, she was endowed with a ravishing beauty. Her auburn hair was of exceeding richness and luxuriance: her eyes were of a deep hazel, and indescribably melting in expression. She was largely—that is, finely formed: but though her bosom rose in a superb swell, and each snowy hemisphere stood out in plump exuberance from the broad and ample chest, yet was her waist of wasp-like symmetry,—and her long arching neck and sweeping length of limb, combined with all the classic elegance of gait and gesture, imparted an air of graceful majesty to her entire appearance.

Having dismissed the old gardener in the manner already described, Mr. Page bustled about to light the lamps upon the table and the wax-candles on the mantel: he then heaped more logs upon the fire—gave a glance at the table to satisfy himself that it was laid in a becoming manner—and, in fine, afforded every indication of an intense anxiety to make himself as useful as possible to the royal visitor and his fair companion. For visions of knighthood, pensions, and sinecures were already floating in the imagination of the ex-bagman, who never missed a chance of turning particular incidents and favourable occurrences as much as possible to his own special advantage. Indeed, as the reader is already aware, he constantly had an eye fixed upon the "main chance," and never beheld anything unusual happen without instantaneously setting his wits to work to render the adventure beneficial to himself.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page, when he had poked his nose into every nook in the apartment to assure himself that nothing remained to be done for the comfort of the guests,—"I have ordered that such refreshments as the house will afford at the moment, shall be immediately got ready; and I am now waiting to receive any commands which your Royal Highness may have to give your humble servitor."

"I have little to say, Mr. Page," responded the Prince, with a smile,—"unless it be to thank you for your zeal in our behalf. The fact is," he added laconically, as if thinking that some little explana-

tion was necessary, but nevertheless giving it with the brevity and haughty curtness of an habitual reserve,—"the fact is that an accident which happened close by to our carriage, has compelled us to demand the hospitality of this mansion for the night. I am aware that it belongs to Sir Richard Stamford: but I presume, from certain observations which have fallen from your lips, that he is not here at the present time. Our acknowledgments are therefore due to you as Sir Richard's representative—and I shall feel obliged if you will order a chamber to be provided for our accommodation."

The latter portion of this sentence was delivered in a low tone and aside to the ear of the bagman, who, with characteristic keenness of perception, instantly comprehended that the Prince and his fair companion would occupy the same sleeping-room. With an obsequious bow, therefore, he retreated from the parlour, and hastened to rejoin his wife and the Bryans, whom he found all busily employed in making such preparations for the royal supper as time and materials allowed.

The excitement caused by the arrival of the Prince and a lady of extraordinary beauty, almost entirely banished the affair of the ghost from the minds of those who were now bustling about to serve up a repast worthy of the distinguished guests. Fortunately there were the roast fowl and boiled ham which Mrs. Bryan had already spoken of; and Julia, assisted by an old cookery-book which happened to be at hand, hastily prepared some sweets, there being plenty of jams and preserved fruits in the store-room The cellar furnished a supply of excellent wine; and thus the arrangements were completed to the satisfaction of Mr. Page, who superintended them all.

Then, assisted by his wife,—for he would not permit the Bryans to take any share in this portion of the ceremony, as he unceremoniously told them that their hands were too brown and grimy-looking,—the ex-bagman carried the dishes to the parlour and served them up with all the pomp and circumstance which he deemed appropriate to the occasion. The Prince and his fair companion sate down to the repast for which the night-air had sharpened their appetites; and while Mr. Page stationed himself behind the chair of the former, Julia took her post in a similar position with regard to the latter. Indeed, if the bagman had been all his life accustomed to the duties of a butler, he could not have acquitted himself more ably in that respect; and his wife, being pleased at having an opportunity of gratifying a vulgar predilection for gazing her fill upon Royalty, likewise endeavoured to render her services as acceptable as possible. The Prince and the lady conversed together upon indifferent subjects during the repast: but the former never once addressed the latter by any name—so that neither Page nor Julia obtained the slightest knowledge who she was. That she was, however, one of the heir-apparent's numerous favourites, they entertained not the least doubt; and that she was of the highest class of society, they likewise felt assured.

When the cloth was removed and Julia had retired, Mr. Page arranged upon the table the decanters of wine and several dishes of preserved fruits, apples, and filberts; and having replenished the hearth with fresh logs, he was about to leave the room, when the Prince said, "I presume that Sir Richard Stamford has broken up his establishment here since the terrible occurrences to which the newspapers have given publicity?"

"Such is the fact, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Page. "For some time past there has only been an old couple in the house to take care of it; and I and my wife came here this evening to look over the baronet's private papers, preparatory to the sale which is to take place next week."

"I believe that the Manor was partially destroyed by fire—was it not?" said the lady, now addressing herself to the ex-bagman for the first time during the evening.

"A fire did occur, madam," replied Page, quite delighted by the winning condescension of her manner and the dulcet music of her voice: "but it did little harm and was speedily extinguished. The effects are scarcely visible outside, and are chiefly confined, I fancy, to the room where the fire occurred."

"The two Aylesbury bankers, Sir Richard's partners, were both executed, I believe—were they not?" inquired the Prince.

"They were, your Royal Highness," answered the ex-traveller. "But whether or not one of them managed to come to life again—or whether his spirit haunts these premises, I cannot say. Certain it is, however, that both my wife and myself saw Mr. Ramsey this very evening in the library, as plainly as I have now the honour to behold your Royal Highness."

"It would only require the circumstance of our taking refuge in a haunted house, to render the romance of our adventure complete," observed the Prince, addressing himself with a significant smile to the lady, who laughed and blushed at the same time.

"Your Royal Highness will of course be inclined to treat my story with disbelief, and perhaps with contempt," pursued Page; "but I can assure your Royal Highness that if it were not Ramsey whom I and my wife saw this evening, it was some one so exceedingly like him that even the resemblance which Sir Richard Stamford bears to your Royal Highness is excelled and outvied in this instance. And as a proof that imagination had nothing to do with the affair, I must beg to add that Mrs. Page and I were both struck with the conviction that it was Ramsey before we had even exchanged an idea or questioned each other as to our respective impressions concerning what we did see."

"But as a sensible man, Mr. Page," said the heir-apparent, "you do not actually and positively believe that you have seen a ghost?"

"I should be sorry to declare most positively that I had—and I can scarcely bring myself to affirm that I have not," responded the ex-bagman. "I saw Ramsey executed—I saw him hang for the usual time—I saw him cut down——"

"And did you see him buried?" demanded the Prince, with a smile: for he was in a particularly good humour on the present occasion, and Mr. Page's manner and discourse somewhat amused him.

"Well—to speak candidly, I did *not* see him buried," was the response to the question just put. "The corpse was claimed, as I understood, by some friends——"

"Oh! pray let us discontinue this topic!" ex-

claimed the lady, shuddering visibly. "I cannot bear to read or think of public executions and all the dread paraphernalia of the gibbet. Depend upon it, Mr. Page, you and your wife were the victims of some optical delusion—or else some practical joke——"

"Pardon me, madam," interrupted Page: "it could not be a delusion, for the reason I have already mentioned—and there was no one in the house at the time who would play us a trick. Ramsey was a man whose personal appearance could not fail to produce an impression upon the mind. Once seen, he was not likely to be forgotten."

"He was very handsome, I believe?" observed the Prince. "At, least, so the newspapers said."

"And they spoke truly, may it please your Royal Highness," returned Mr. Page, who, however much he disliked garrulity in others, was terribly prone to it himself. "Mr. Ramsey was about eight-and-twenty—tall in stature—slightly but elegantly made—with features perfectly regular and of a Grecian cast—splendid dark eyes—brilliant teeth—and an olive complexion."

"It was almost a pity to give such a man up to the hangman," observed the Prince. "But we will discontinue the subject now, if you please," he added, at the same time giving a gentle inclination of his head as a hint that Mr. Page might withdraw.

The ex-traveller accordingly hastened to rejoin his wife and the Bryans; and when he entered the room where they were, he found them busily engaged in examining something which Julia was holding close to the candle. So deeply absorbed were they in the contemplation of the object of such enthralling interest, that they did not immediately observe the entrance of Mr. Page; and he had already thrust his head over his wife's shoulder to see what she had got in her hand, ere his presence was remarked. Then she gave a sudden start, and the Bryans uttered ejaculations of terror—while Page caught a glimpse of a miniature portrait of Ramsey!

"Dear me, how you have frightened us!" cried Julia, petulantly. "What made you come creeping in so stealthily?"

"I didn't," answered Page. "'Twas your being so intent on this picture, that you could not hear my footsteps. Where did you get it?"

And as he asked this question, he took the miniature from Julia's hand and examined it with attention. The likeness was perfect: no one who had ever seen Ramsey even for a single moment could fail to be struck by the fidelity with which his features and the very expression of his countenance in his usual mood were depicted there.

The explanation demanded was speedily given.

"The bed-chamber which was originally prepared for us," said Julia, addressing herself to her husband, "is the best in the mansion; and I therefore resolved that it should be appropriated to the use of the Prince and his lady. Well, then, it was necessary to get another room ready for you and me; and so Mrs. Bryan showed me through several chambers that I might select the one I fancied. When I had made my choice, we began to arrange the bed; and, lo and behold! between the mattresses we found this miniature."

"Ah! it doubtless belonged to Lady Stamford," observed Page. "The resemblance to Ramsey is admirably preserved—it is a speaking likeness! No wonder that her ladyship should have loved him as she did—he was a very handsome man. But, by the bye," he ejaculated, a sudden thought striking him, "the Prince has been talking to me about him; and I will just take the liberty of showing his Royal Highness this portrait."

To the presence of the heir-apparent and the lady did Mr. Page accordingly return; and, with numerous apologies for his intrusion, he explained his motive by producing the miniature. Even in the minds of the well-educated and the enlightened, there always exists a degree of interest—whether morbid or not, we leave our readers to determine—respecting those individuals who have gained an infamous renown alike by their crimes and the death whereby they have expiated them: and this fact will account for the attention with which his Royal Highness now contemplated the portrait of Ramsey. Nor less did the lady exhibit a degree of interest in the examination of those features which were truly of that classic beauty described by the ex-bagman; and as she returned the picture to Mr. Page, she observed, "Crime is not written upon that countenance: not a single lineament denotes an evil propensity. Surely the phrenologist, who studies the features as an index to the mind, must often err?"

"Undoubtedly," answered the Prince. "We thank you, Mr. Page, for your attention in bringing that portrait for our inspection; and for my part I must admit that it is indeed a countenance which, once seen, could not be easily forgotten. However, your ghost-story will not prevent me from sleeping soundly to-night—for I am overcome with weariness: and we will therefore retire to rest."

Page bowed—thrust the miniature into his pocket—and withdrew for the purpose of sending Julia to conduct the heir-apparent and his fair companion to the chamber prepared for their reception. Mrs. Page had already made herself acquainted with the arrangements of the mansion: and she was therefore enabled to act the part of guide to the distinguished visitors. Carrying a wax-candle in each hand, she preceded them to their apartment, where she offered her assistance in respect to the night-toilette of the lady, the Prince retiring into the adjacent dressing-room: but the proposal was declined with a condescending smile and a few words of thanks—and Mrs. Page withdrew to the chamber prepared for herself and husband.

When this worthy couple were alone together, the ex-bagman did not immediately commence laying aside his apparel: but, flinging himself into a great arm-chair, he said, "I think, my dear Julia, that our attentions have made some impression upon his Royal Highness and that lady."

"Very probably," answered his wife in a laconic manner: then, after a few moments' silence, she added, "But if you ever hope to obtain anything from the Prince's goodnature, depend upon it you are woefully mistaken. He is notoriously the most ungrateful man alive. I wish we could find out who that lady is."

"Why so?" demanded Page.

"Simply because I have an idea that there's some little intrigue or love affair going on in that quarter, which we might turn to our own advantage," said Julia. "That lady wears a wedding-ring on her finger—and yet we know she is not the Prince's wife. Besides, in the corner of her white cambric pocket-handkerchief there is a small coronet stamped in gold-leaf or something of the kind; and so I sup-

pose she is a woman of high rank. I saw the coronet quite plain while I was standing behind her at dinner-time. And then, don't you think that if there wasn't some reason for keeping her name secret, the Prince would have alluded to her otherwise than as '*this lady*.' Of course he would."

"You are admirably sharp-witted, Julia!" exclaimed Mr. Page, delighted with his wife's penetration. "These points that you have mentioned are very important indeed."

"To be sure they are," returned the young woman: "and if you could only find out who this lady is, there's no telling how many thousands of pounds we might get to bribe us to secrecy."

"But how can I manage? What do you suggest?" demanded Page.

"There's only one way that I know of," responded Julia; "and that is to listen at the door of their room. Ten to one but what you will be able to glean from their conversation something to put you on the right scent."

"By Jove! it shall be done," ejaculated the ex-traveller, bounding from his seat. "We have lost the precious documents containing the correspondence between your late kinswoman Hannah and Lady Stamford: but we won't let this new opportunity of feathering our nest slip through our fingers. Which is the room where the Prince and his fair lady are to pass the night?"

"The second door on the other side of the passage," answered Julia.

"All right," said Page, putting off his shoes: then, carefully issuing from the chamber, he stole noiselessly along the corridor until he reached the vicinage of the Prince's apartment. Julia stood holding the light at the threshold of her own room until she saw that her husband had reached the proper destination: she then withdrew, closing the door—so that a profound darkness now reigned in the passage.

And silence prevailed throughout the mansion.

But in a few minutes Mr. Page, whose ear was closely applied to the key-hole, heard a door open within the chamber; and, rightly conceiving it to be a sign that the Prince had emerged from the dressing-room adjoining, he now listened with a breathless attention. Nor did he long play the eaves-dropper in vain: for the Prince and his fair companion began to converse.

"My dearest Georgiana," said his Royal Highness, "how superbly beautiful you appear to-night. Never were you more truly handsome in my eyes!"

"Flatterer!" exclaimed the lady, with a laugh which resounded softly and deliciously merry as musical pearls: "into what temptation have you not led me? But seriously speaking, my dear Prince—do you really feel assured that there is no danger to be apprehended from the prying eyes of that conceited, forward, impudent man who thrust his attentions so officiously upon us?"

"Not the slightest, my beautiful Georgiana," answered his Royal Highness: and the murmurs of soft and billing kisses were wafted to the ears of Mr. Page, who had winced somewhat under the startling epithets which the lady, little suspecting he was so near, had lavished upon him.

"You are certain that he did not recognise me?" said Georgiana, after a short pause.

"Quite confident," responded the Prince. "I watched him narrowly while he was first surveying you—which he did, by the bye, like an insolent rascal as he is: and I am sure that he no more suspects you to be the Duchess of Devonshire than I believe him to be the Emperor of China. No, my lovely Georgiana—make your mind perfectly easy upon that head. Had he known you—had he recognised you when we first entered this house, I should have instantly addressed you by your name and title—and *then* we should have been compelled to occupy separate chambers to-night. Oh! what a punishment that would have been to me, charming and fascinating creature that you are! But, gracious heaven! what noise is that?" suddenly exclaimed his Royal Highness in a tone of alarm.

And at the same instant a scream burst from the lips of the Duchess of Devonshire.

Page was rivetted to the spot: his ear was nailed to the key-hole. He could not have run away, even if he had wished. The sound which had terrified the Prince and Duchess, whatever it might have been, was assuredly *within* the room, and not caused either by himself at the door or any one else outside. In fact no noise of any kind reached Page's ear; and he was therefore completely ignorant of the cause of the alarm inside the apartment. And his curiosity and suspense were equal to his ignorance on this point.

But, hark! rapid and apparently angry whispering is going on within the chamber. Page holds his breath—a pin might be heard to drop in the passage, so fearful is he that even the rustling of his clothes should prevent him from catching an idea of what is progressing on the other side of that door. Vain, however, are his attempts—useless all his strainings to distinguish the words that are spoken. He can hear the voice of the Prince—then that of the Duchess of Devonshire. The former speaks in anger—the latter in terror. And yet they are not addressing each other—nor quarrelling together. No—*there is evidently a third person in that room!*

The incidents which brought Mr. Page to this conviction all passed in the space of a minute—or rather the whispering was characterised by that variety of intonation which caused the certainty to spring up in his mind that there was a *third* voice mingling therein. But this third individual, whoever it were—and whether male or female Page knew not—spoke in so low a key that it seemed merely the murmuring of the wind: then the Prince spoke again—then the Duchess of Devonshire—and then this third person interrupted them suddenly. Hark! the voice is louder now: it is a man's! Yes—there is no longer any doubt on that head: but the voice is not familiar to the eaves-dropper. He does not recognise it. That it is not the gruff coarse voice of the old gardener, he however feels assured. Who, then, can the third person in that room be?—and what is the meaning of this strange, romantic, and darkly mysterious incident?

Still does Mr. Page listen. He is bewildered—astounded. The thought of quitting his place at that door does not once enter his head: the probability that some one may suddenly issue forth never strikes him. He is absorbed—totally absorbed—in all that is passing within,—or rather, in as much of it as he can comprehend.

And this, as far as the rapidly-whispered discourse goes, is nothing at all. Not a single sentence

can be distinguish—not a word can he catch. Vague and uncertain whisperings rustle and murmur as it were upon his ears: but their sense is lost to him—their meaning reaches him not. Now he knows that the Prince is speaking—now he can tell that the Duchess of Devonshire has taken up the discourse—and then he is aware that the *other individual* is talking in his turn.

Thus does this strange trialogue continue for upwards of ten minutes. Page strains with all his moral energies—with all his vital powers, to catch the significance of the discourse. He moves not a limb—he stirs not a muscle—and yet he is struggling as it were with a desperate energy. The perspiration pours off him, although the night air in that long passage is icy cold. Oh! if he could only catch a sentence—a word—a syllable—it might afford him a key to all the rest! But, no—the whispering is continued rapidly and with excitement: an occasional ejaculation of wonder, anger, or terror—Page knows not which—bursts from the Prince and the Duchess;—and then the third voice enjoins silence with a "Hush!" that rustles like a low wind amidst the dead leaves of the forest.

There is something awfully mysterious in all this—and by degrees a vague and undefined terror creeps over the eaves-dropper. The adventure in the library flashes back to his mind: in the midst of that deep darkness which envelopes him, he fears lest the cold hand of Ramsey's corpse should be suddenly laid upon him. Alarm grows on him rapidly. He cannot reason within himself against his augmenting terrors. The icy chill of superstitious dread circles round him—expands over his form—seizes on his entire being—penetrates to his very heart's core. He would rise from his kneeling posture—Oh! he would rise and flee precipitately—but his limbs refuse to perform their office—he is frozen with horror that increases every moment: he feels like a statue of marble animated with the mind of a man!

At this crisis—when he felt as if his brain were beginning to reel, and he ceased to perceive whether the whispering inside the room was going on or not—he was suddenly recalled, or rather startled back into recollection by the momentary shaking of the handle of the door, as if somebody had grasped it within and was about to turn it.

Springing to his feet, as if under the influence of galvanism, Page stepped back and then leant motionless against the wall.

The rustling of his clothes had scarcely ceased, when the door opened—and a man came cautiously forth.

Page held his breath: but in the pitchy darkness which prevailed, he could neither see nor be seen. No light flashed forth from the door during the instant that it was thus unclosed to allow the individual egress: and it was shut again in a moment. But Page knew, by the tread of the boots upon the oaken floor of the passage, as the person issued from the room, that it *was* a man: besides, who could it be but that *third individual* whose voice had completed the whispered trialogue?

Page, we said, held his breath—and the man, whoever he were, paused for a few instants outside the door, apparently to listen if all were still. Then, stealing cautiously along the passage, he proceeded towards the stairs which he descended with equal carefulness. At length the sounds of his footsteps ceased altogether.

The ex-bagman now crept noiselessly back to his own chamber, where he narrated to Julia all that had occurred. She was as much astonished as he had been at the incident: but the main point being accomplished,—namely, the discovery that the Prince's fair companion was none other than the high-born and splendid Duchess of Devonshire—Mrs. Page chose rather to speculate upon what benefit the knowledge of this secret might produce, than on the more mysterious event which defied all conjecture.

At an early hour on the following morning a plain carriage, attended by only one footman in addition to the coachman, drove up to the front-door of Stamford Manor. The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Devonshire then came forth from their chamber, and were met at the head of the stairs by Mr. and Mrs. Page, the former of whom inquired whether it would please his Royal Highness to partake of breakfast. An answer in the negative was given: but the Prince expressed his thanks for the hospitality he had received — and, putting ten guineas into Page's hand, desired him to give them to the dependants of the mansion.

His Royal Highness then handed the Duchess of Devonshire into the carriage, and entering it after her, gave some whispered instructions to the footman, who bowed respectfully—closed the door—and sprang up to his place by the side of the coachman. The next moment the vehicle was rolling rapidly away from Stamford Manor.

Mr. Page presented the Bryans with a guinea, alleging in a pompous speech that the Prince had desired that it might be bestowed upon them as a mark of his satisfaction at the treatment he had received; and the unsophisticated old couple, never dreaming that they were being robbed as coolly and impudently as if it were upon the highway, were profoundly delighted and grateful. The astute Mr. Page accordingly pocketed nine guineas by the little transaction.

In the course of the day, he and his wife, having completed their business at Stamford Manor, took their leave of the Bryans and walked across the fields to Aylesbury, whence they procured a conveyance for Windsor.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE VEILED LADY.

THE reader will be pleased to recollect that the grand ball at Carlton House, on the occasion when Pauline Clarendon was presented to the Prince of Wales, took place on a Monday evening. It was on the following morning that Mr. Clarendon received the mysterious visit from the veiled lady, who, on taking leave of him, had expressed herself in these terms:—"For the remainder of this week and throughout the next shall I each morning look into the *Times* newspaper: if no communication be made to me through its advertising columns, I shall conclude that you are a mere grumbler who dares not act—a poltroon who can complain but who lacks the energy necessary to improve his condition and accomplish his desires. On the other hand, if a communication should appear in that journal, addressed to the '*Veiled Lady*,' it will instantaneously be attended to."

We must now observe that the remainder of the week in which the visit was paid by this veiled lady to Mr. Clarendon, passed away—and no advertisement of the nature specified appeared in the *Times* newspaper. On the following Sunday night was it that the Magsman kept his appointment with the masked nobleman in Hyde Park: on the ensuing Wednesday morning was it that the Prince of Wales had the party of dancing-girls at Carlton House, and received a visit from his royal father;—and on the Thursday night it was that the incidents related in the preceding chapter occurred at Stamford Manor. The reader will thus perceive that although the incidents which have occupied the last twenty-seven chapters, have been varied and numerous, yet that the time occupied in the action of this portion of our drama has only been ten days: and therefore the time prescribed by the veiled lady in her farewell speech to Mr. Clarendon, had not yet quite expired.

But it was now Friday morning—and Mr. Clarendon had but this one day to decide whether he should seek an interview with the veiled lady or not: for if he determined in the affirmative, it was necessary to send the advertisement for publication in the *Times* of the next morning.

Again, therefore, do we find him in his study, pondering upon the position of his affairs: and, as he pressed his hand to his throbbing brows, it was thus that his musings ran:—

"Why do I vacillate thus?—why have I hesitated to summon that mysterious lady to my presence by the means of communication which she pointed out? Octavia refused the proposal of marriage which Arthur Eaton made to her: and she was wrong—foolish—insensate! Such an alliance would have been most advantageous to her—most beneficial to me. It would have given her a position as good as that which Pauline will shortly attain when she becomes Lady Florimel: and it would have ensured the continuation of a handsome independence to myself. But she refused — refused to espouse her cousin, simply because she did not love him! At least such was the reason she gave: yet I almost begin to imagine that there is some truth in the suspicions which Arthur expressed to me ere he made her the offer of his hand. Yes—it is probable that she loves another. But who can the object of her affections be? I cannot even conjecture. And now, since Wednesday morning she has been staying with the Duchess of Devonshire, whose acquaintance she formed I scarcely know how. There must be something very fascinating in the girl that she should have thus made herself so influential and valuable a friend: and it would be heart-breaking indeed, were she to throw herself away upon any penniless or untitled individual, merely in obedience to the sickly sentimentalism which young maidens denominate *love*. But how am *I* to act?—for *that* is the question. This veiled lady who paid me so mysterious a visit last Tuesday week, is evidently well acquainted with all my affairs. She emphatically observed that she knew my position to be painful and intolerable to a degree; and she hinted—nay, more than hinted, at the possibility of placing me on that eminence to which my ambition aspires. Can she read, then, the secret of my heart?—has she penetrated with eagle glance into my soul and beheld the cravings that rack me—the anxious longings which I cherish for those honours that at one time seemed almost within my grasp? Yes—and should I not obey that unaccountable and mysterious presentiment which her visit excited in my brain,—a presentiment teaching me that I had reached some point or crisis in my destiny which would give a colour to all the rest of my existence! Oh! assuredly I must see this veiled lady once more. I can but hear her proposals and listen to the conditions upon which she has offered to aid me. If they be agreeable, I can accept them: if they be repugnant to my feelings, I can reject them."

Having thus made up his mind how to act, Mr Clarendon wrote a single line upon a slip of paper, which he forthwith took to the office of the *Times* newspaper.

Reader, have you not frequently observed the strange, mysterious, and often deeply affecting advertisements which appear at the top of the second column on the front page of the *Times*? The death-bed has known no anguish and the churchyard no misery greater than the affliction which so often prompts the insertion of a few lines in that place. By those means, the deserted wife implores her husband to return to the home which his absence has left desolate, and to the children whom his flight has made beggars: or else it is the husband who beseeches a guilty wife to go back for her innocent offspring's sake, and all shall be forgiven! And by those means, also, does the criminal who is playing at hide-and-seek with the officers of justice, communicate to his friends that intelligence which he dares not entrust to the post-office; or the bailiff-hunted debtor adopts this medium to acknowledge the receipt of some pecuniary assistance which an indulgent relative had forwarded to an address specified, that address being not however the recipient's home. That small space in the *Times* newspaper—that nook of a couple of square inches—often contains a whole world of wild and harrowed feelings. It is the modern Temple of Delphi to which the heart flies to seek for those oracles of hope which are lost elsewhere: but, alas! how often does it prove the Morgue where appalling suspense becomes changed into the conviction of overwhelming sorrow!

And it was in this place in the *Times* newspaper that the following brief advertisement appeared upon the Saturday morning:—

TO THE VEILED LADY.—Another and immediate interview is requested by C.

Mr. Clarendon rose at an earlier hour than usual on this morning, which he felt was destined to be a memorable one in the history of his life. An unnatural excitement imparted a hectic flush to his usually sallow cheeks; and a wild gleaming light shone in his restless eyes.

At any other time Pauline would have noticed her father's altered appearance, and would have affectionately inquired the cause: but on the present occasion she also was absorbed in her own reflections, which were not of a pleasurable nature. And, like her father too, did she endeavour to conceal the pre-occupation of her mind: thus were parent and daughter to a certain extent practising duplicity towards each other. Few observations were exchanged at the breakfast table; and the moment he had partaken of a cup of chocolate,—for the more substantial food remained untasted by him,—Mr. Clarendon repaired to his study.

At eleven o'clock on that forenoon a loud double knock and a ring at the front door resounded through the house. Pauline hastened to the window of the front parlour and peeped from behind the curtain in a manner denoting the most acute anxiety and suspense: but when she observed that there was no carriage at the door and that the arrival was a lady on foot, she heaved a profound sigh—turned away from the casement—and reseating herself on the sofa, fell into a train of gloomy reflections.

But upon Mr. Clarendon that knock and ring produced the startling influence of galvanism; and bounding from his chair, he stood in trembling expectation of beholding the mysterious being whom he had adjured to appear.

Nor was he disappointed: for in a few moments the veiled lady stood before him.

Penetrating and piercing was the glance which he threw upon her, in order, if possible, to obtain a glimpse of her features: but, no—the thick black veil was still so folded as to render it impossible for him to gratify his curiosity. Nevertheless, as his looks swept her form, he beheld all that symmetrical grace of outline and all that beauty of proportion which had struck him on the former occasion of her visit; and a straggling curl, escaping from beneath the veil and lying on the sloping shoulder, showed that her hair was of a rich dark, glossy brown.

Mr. Clarendon placed a chair for her accommodation, and then resuming his own seat, observed, "You saw my advertisement in this morning's *Times*?"

"Otherwise I should not be here," promptly answered the lady, in that musical voice which nature never meant to waft any other language than that of love, and peace, and gaiety. "You have pondered well upon the discourse which took place between us last Tuesday week?"

"I have," returned Mr. Clarendon. "Pray come to the point at once—be explicit—And relieve me

from suspense. What do you know of my affairs?—what can you do for me?—and who are you?"

"I know everything concerning you, Mr. Clarendon," rejoined the lady; "not only your position—but likewise your secret thoughts. When I was with you on the former occasion, I read your soul thoroughly and comprehended your character well. You are ambitious—and your longings may be gratified, if you have the courage to enter upon the course which I shall point out."

"And that course?" said Mr. Clarendon, trembling with agitation.

"Is not free from crime," answered the lady, in a resolute tone: and, as she leant slightly forward, it seemed to Mr. Clarendon that her eyes shone with a sinister lustre even through the thick folds of the black veil.

"Crime!—crime!" murmured the ambitious man: "is the world, then, so constituted that nothing can be done without crime? But there are degrees in crime, lady," he said aloud, and addressing himself directly to her.

"He who aspires to great things, must not hesitate to commit great crimes," was the startling response: and the voice which gave utterance to these ferocious words was suitably stern and merciless in its tone.

"Great crimes!" repeated Mr. Clarendon. "Yes—to wrong the orphan or rob the widow—to plunder the confiding and the unprotected,—these are great crimes: but——"

"But they are nothing in comparison with the deeds which men must often perpetrate to gain a special end," exclaimed the lady. "Forgery is a greater crime than any you have named; and *murder*," she added, sinking her voice to a low whisper, so that her words came hissing through the veil as if it were a serpent's head that were concealed behind it,—"*murder* is the greatest crime of all!"

"Murder!" repeated Mr. Clarendon, his whole frame convulsing with a shudder that was perfectly visible. "Who art thou, temptress?—why dost thou come hither to try me?—what dost thou mean?"

"Listen," said the lady, with imperturbable calmness and self-possession. "Suppose that you were walking in company with the Hon. Arthur Eaton along the brink of a tremendous precipice overlooking the sea; and suppose that no eye saw you save that of God—and you were well convinced that human suspicion would never attach itself to you, but that you might continue to hold your head erect——"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed Mr. Clarendon: "I understand you but too well. Great heaven! what feeling is this that prompts me to fall into your views—that impels me to rush blindly into the course which you are already developing with a dim yet horrible significancy——"

"Oh! give not way to a maudlin sentimentalism," cried the lady, in a tone of contempt: "but proclaim yourself at once a man who is able to resolve sternly and act courageously. I say, then—would you, in the case which I propounded, thrust forth your hand and hurl from the precipice the only human being who stands between yourself and a proud title with a princely fortune?"

"Who are you that ask this question?" demanded Clarendon, rising from his seat. "What guarantee have I that no treachery is intended by your visit—that no snare is laid for me by your language?"

"The guarantee that there are no witnesses to our discourse, and that you could indignantly deny any averments I might choose to make publicly respecting the particulars of this interview. This is your guarantee," added the lady, emphatically.

"True!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon. "Well—I will yield to the current which is already beginning to bear me along—I will throw myself entirely upon your honour and mercy—and I will confess all that you desire me to admit. Now do you understand me?—and are you satisfied?"

"I understand that you will not hesitate at *any* crime which may be necessary to accomplish certain aims," said the lady: "promise me *this*—and I shall be satisfied."

"I promise," answered Mr. Clarendon, in a tone rendered firm by the desperation of a soul suddenly nerved to accomplish any turpitude: "nay more—I swear!"

"Good!" exclaimed the lady, in a voice expressive of that deep concentrated satisfaction which a tigress might be supposed to feel after feasting her ravenous maw on human flesh. "And now listen to the terms on which I offer to serve you. But start not—the condition is a singular one—and it is——"

"Name it—name it!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, his suspense being once more raised to a feverish pitch. "What is this condition?"

"That you marry me!" was the reply.

"Woman, you are mad—or you are making a cruel mockery of my feelings!" cried Mr. Clarendon, springing from his seat.

"I never was more serious in my life," observed the lady, in that calm, imperturbable tone which bespoke alike the remorseless nature of her disposition and the strength of her character. "Resume your seat—and listen attentively."

Mr. Clarendon sate down accordingly.

"The Hon. Arthur Eaton," continued the lady, "stands between you and the Marchmont peerage. Consequently his removal from the theatre of this world is necessary to *your* interests. On the other hand, his death can alone appease the now insatiate vengeance which I entertain towards him. But *you* cannot make him your victim without practising violence or stratagem—and in either case suspicion may fall upon you: and *I* am powerless, so long as I remain unaided and alone. But *together*, we may accomplish our purpose; and the same result which ministers to *your* ambition, gratifies *my* revenge. Now, Mr. Clarendon, do you comprehend me?"

"I do," was the gloomy answer. "But what happiness, think you, will result from an alliance such as this which you propose that we should form?"

"Happiness!" ejaculated the lady, in a tone of ineffable contempt: "what care we for domestic happiness? Our aims are of a higher nature and have a grander scope. *You* have your ambition to gratify—*I* my vengeance: *you* will attain the object of your desires—*I* shall reach mine. These ends once accomplished, what matters it whether we suit each other as husband and wife? On the contrary, let us each pursue our own course according to our respective fancy and taste. Have you your mistresses, should it so please you: but blame me not if I likewise have my lovers. But should it chance that we experience an affection for each other,—should your courage in executing our purpose win my heart, and should my beauty captivate you,—well, so much the better! For I *am* beautiful—

exceedingly beautiful—at least the world says so: and on that score you will not be ashamed of your wife."

"But this implacable vengeance which you cherish against Arthur Eaton," said Mr. Clarendon,—"whence did it arise?—how has he provoked your hatred?"

"Would you know the truth?" she exclaimed, with a laugh which sounded wild and savage from behind that thick black veil. "Oh! it is a strange secret for a woman to reveal to the man whom she invites to marry her! Nevertheless, I am not disposed to stand upon any false delicacy in these negotiations which are now progressing between us. In a word, then, Mr. Clarendon," she added, her voice becoming suddenly hoarse and thick, "Arthur Eaton seduced me—and I have sworn to wreak a deadly vengeance upon him!"

"Methought that he loved—at least at one time—a certain Miss Fernanda Aylmer?" said Clarendon: "surely—surely, you cannot be the niece of the Earl of Desborough?"

"There is no need for farther disguise nor mystery," exclaimed the lady. "Yes—I am Fernanda Aylmer!"

And she threw back the dark veil—thus revealing to the eyes of Mr. Clarendon that beauteous countenance which seemed as unfit to express the working of all the darkest passions of the human soul as the blushing rose to bear the slime of the snail upon its bloom.

The snowy skin and the scarlet lip—the luxuriant brown hair and the deep violet eyes—the proudly-rising throat and the well developed but not exuberant bust—the exquisitely chiselled nose and the pearly teeth—the high forehead softly veined, and the classically rounded chin,—these were the charms which constituted the whole glory of dazzling beauty that burst upon the sight of Mr. Clarendon.

He had heard of Miss Aylmer on many occasions: but he had never seen her face until now. And when it was thus revealed to him, his first feeling was one of joy and pleasure at the idea of possessing such a bride: his second was an emotion of mingled horror and dread at the thought of taking to his bosom a snake with so lovely a skin. But again, and all in a moment, did his sentiments undergo a transition—and heeding only the glittering prize of a coronet which by *her* agency appeared to be within his reach, the infatuated votary of ambition smiled with ineffable satisfaction as he took her hand, saying, "Fernanda, you are adorable—and I already love you!"

"Then, as we have come to so perfect an understanding on all points," exclaimed Miss Aylmer, "let there be no delay in affording each other the proper guarantees of our mutual sincerity. The distance is not great from hence to Doctors' Commons—a license can be procured there in a few minutes—and at the private residence of some clergyman in the neighbourhood may our hands be joined in matrimonial bonds. Come, Mr. Clarendon—do you hesitate?"

"Not at all," was the reply. "But I was thinking that the abruptness of this step would surprise the world—my daughters too——"

"We care nothing for the world," interrupted Fernanda, petulantly: "and as for your daughters—since they look coldly upon their father, or supercilliously upon the mother-in-law whom he may introduce to them?"

"Assuredly not," answered Mr. Clarendon. "But there is still another objection which I am compelled to urge against the precipitation of this step——"

"Speak—speak!" ejaculated Fernanda, impatiently.

"You are probably aware that my income depends wholly and solely upon the generosity of Lord Marchmont," continued Mr. Clarendon; "and should he take offence at this marriage—or should his son Arthur conceive that such an alliance is at least fraught with suspicion, if not actual menace towards himself——"

"In that case you will lose your income—is it not so?" exclaimed Fernanda: then, without waiting for a reply, she observed, "But you may make yourself perfectly easy upon that head. I am not without friends or resources."

"Yes—I am well aware that your uncle the Earl of Desborough is rich," said Mr. Clarendon: "but I was fearful that, should *he* likewise disapprove of this match, your own means would be dried up as well as my own."

"I care not the value of a grain of sand for either Lord or Lady Desborough," returned Miss Aylmer; "and, thank heaven! I am not dependent upon their bounty. In Lord Montgomery I possess a generous relative and kind friend—and for many months past he has supplied my purse without even inquiring the purposes for which I have needed considerable sums of gold. Look!" she exclaimed, drawing forth several Bank-notes from the bosom of her dress and displaying them before the eyes of Mr. Clarendon: "here are two thousand pounds—and this amount will last us a considerable time. When it is gone, my cousin Lord Montgomery will not fail to act as my banker."

"But how know you that even *he* may approve of this marriage?" demanded Mr. Clarendon.

"I know that he will not disapprove of anything that I may do in order to forward my own interests or aims," answered Miss Aylmer, in a decided tone. "Are all your objections now set at rest?—or have you any farther scruples to get rid of?"

"None," responded Mr. Clarendon, yielding to the force of circumstances—or rather to the temptations thrown in his way—with the desperate firmness of a man who surrenders up his soul to Satan.

Miss Aylmer replaced the veil over her countenance and quitted the house, Mr. Clarendon undertaking to meet her in a few minutes in Portland Place. His toilette was then hurriedly performed; and, without breathing a word of his intentions to his daughter Pauline, he hastened to join his intended bride at the spot where she was waiting for him. A hackney-coach was immediately summoned; and the driver received orders to repair direct to Doctors' Commons.

CHAPTER CIV.

PAULINE.

We have already stated that Pauline was too much absorbed in her own mournful reflections to notice the excited manner of her father on this memorable morning. We have also observed that when Fernanda Aylmer knocked at the door, the young maiden hurried to the window and was disappoint

when she found that the arrival was not the one which she was evidently awaiting in deep suspense.

Resuming her seat upon the sofa, the beauteous Pauline gave way to her sorrowful meditations: but from time to time she looked at her watch—that very watch which Lady Desborough had presented to her at the villa in the Edgeware Road.

At length she observed that it was mid-day—and the excitement of suspense and impatience was becoming intolerable.

Drawing forth a note from her bosom, she read it with attention; and the tears fell from her eyes, moistening the page with their pearly shower.

The contents of this letter were as follow:—

"*Carlton House, Wednesday afternoon.*

"MY DEAR MISS PAULINE,

"I regret—deeply regret—to be compelled to address you upon a most unpleasant subject: but I implore you to tranquillise yourself and listen to the good counsel which Lord Florimel will give you. Poor Octavia called upon me just now. That she was about to take this step, you were doubtless aware. Need I assure you that I received her with kindness—and that I said all I could to console her? But her excitement grew alarming; and she became very ill. Fortunately the Duchess of Devonshire arrived at the moment; and her Grace (with whom I am charmed to find that you are acquainted) volunteered to take charge of the dear girl. To this proposal I readily assented, fearful that if Octavia were conveyed home immediately, your father would inevitably discover all! The Duchess of Devonshire has therefore taken your dear sister to a secluded villa which her Grace possesses at a little distance from London; and there can be no doubt that in two or three days Octavia will be completely restored to health. The moment her Grace had departed with your sister, I sent for Lord Florimel, to whom I candidly narrated what had occurred,—deeming him to be the most proper person to break the intelligence to you, and advise with you how to account to your father for Octavia's temporary absence from home. His lordship kindly and promptly undertook this task: but he requested me to pen a few lines to you, of which he offered to become the bearer. Hence this brief note.

"I should add that her Grace of Devonshire has promised to visit you on Saturday next, in the forenoon,—so that she may either report to you the progress which your dear sister may be making towards complete convalescence, or else have the pleasure of restoring Octavia altogether to your arms.

"That this latter alternative may be the one which next Saturday morning will see accomplished, is a wish that comes from the heart of

"Your affectionate friend,
"GEORGE P."

Such was the letter from the Prince of Wales which Pauline Clarendon now read. As the reader may observe by the heading, it was written on the preceding Wednesday afternoon—a couple of hours after the terrible scene which occurred at Carlton House in respect to Octavia.

And why did the young lady now refer to it again? Simply to assure herself that the visit of the Duchess of Devonshire was indeed promised for the forenoon of this Saturday on which we find her so anxiously awaiting the arrival of her Grace.

Scarcely had she read the contents of that page which in a few moments became moistened with her tears, when a carriage stopped at the door. Thrusting the letter in her bosom, Pauline hurried to the window; and a faint smile of satisfaction appeared upon her lips, as she beheld her devoted lover Lord Florimel descend. Another minute—and she was clasped in his arms.

"What news of Octavia, my dearest Pauline?" he demanded, leading her to a seat and placing himself by her side: then, perceiving that her countenance bore traces of recent weeping, he exclaimed, ere she had time to reply, "Alas! nothing satisfactory, I am afraid. But tell me, Pauline—has any additional intelligence reached you?"

"None, dear Gabriel," was the answer. "You are aware that the Duchess of Devonshire was to call this morning: but it is now past mid-day—and she has not yet made her appearance."

"Her Grace will be sure to come, beloved girl," said Florimel, speaking in his most soothing tone and lavishing the tenderest caresses upon the charming creature on whom his affections were so devoutly fixed. "Let us hope for the best."

"Oh! I am almost wearied of indulging in hope concerning this fatal amour of my unhappy sister with the Prince," exclaimed Pauline, reposing her beauteous head upon her lover's shoulder and pressing her hand in both her own. "I tremble for the consequences, Gabriel. What can I do, if her Grace should not come?—or how am I to act in the still more embarrassing position in which I shall be placed if Octavia do not return home well in health and comparatively tranquillised in mind? Must I not fly to her and offer the consolations of a sister?—and yet how can I leave my father unattended by either of his daughters? Moreover, such a step on my part would probably engender suspicions in his mind——"

"But he is aware that Octavia is staying with the Duchess—is he not?" inquired Florimel.

"Yes," was the answer. "He does not however suspect that she is ill—much less that she has anything so very dreadful preying upon her mind. And I feel, Gabriel, as if I were playing a treacherous and false part towards my father," continued Pauline, in a tone of deep feeling and earnest sincerity: "it seems to me that I am culpable of great duplicity and falsehood in concealing from him the real truth. Nevertheless, that truth I dare not avow: for if my father's suspicions were once excited, he would pursue his inquiries and investigation until he had fathomed the whole affair in all its lamentable details. And there is another source of uneasiness which I experience," observed Pauline, after a few moments' pause; "which is, that the real extent of Octavia's illness was not made known to me. From the moment that you delivered the Prince's letter into my hands last Wednesday afternoon, I have been tortured with misgivings to the effect that Octavia is worse than his Royal Highness represented. What did he tell you, Gabriel?—do you really believe that his note contained the entire truth, and that nothing still more unfavourable was concealed?"

"The Prince gave me precisely the same account which was contained in his letter, dear Pauline," answered Lord Florimel. "I repeated to you word for word all he said to me: but if you wish, I will tell it to you over again."

At this moment a loud double knock resounded through the house; and Pauline rushed to the window. A carriage, with a ducal coronet upon the panels, was standing at the door—and the Duchess of Devonshire immediately alighted. But she was alone—Octavia was not with her—and Pauline's heart sank with a sickening sensation in her bosom.

The Duchess was conducted to the drawing-room

and thither did Pauline repair, leaning upon Florimel's arm—for a faintness was in all her limbs, and her spirit was crushed with a presentiment of evil.

"I am glad that you are here, Gabriel," were the first words which the Duchess uttered, as she caught sight of the young nobleman: then, taking Pauline's hand, she said, "My dear young friend, I shall not keep you in a state of unnecessary suspense——"

"No—no; for heaven's sake, speak!" murmured the maiden, shuddering from head to foot. "I see that your grace has bad news for me——"

"Alas! would that I could give you some reassuring answer!" exclaimed the Duchess: "but poor Octavia is far from well—the blow has been a cruel one!"

"But she is alive?" ejaculated Pauline, in a tone of thrilling anguish, as the terrible idea flashed to her imagination that her beloved sister was no more and that the Duchess was about to break the tidings of her death as gently as possible.

"Oh! entertain not such a dreadful apprehension!" cried Georgiana, penetrating her thoughts. "Yes—Octavia is alive, thank heaven—and well too in bodily health——"

"Oh, horror! I begin to comprehend the appalling truth!" shrieked forth the wretched Pauline: "it is her reason that is affected—her senses have abandoned her! Great heavens, I understand it all now—and your Grace does not contradict the fact! Alas—alas! my poor dear ruined sister, what has thy destroyer done to thee?—what new iniquity has he perpetrated? Oh, vengeance upon his head—no, not vengeance—'tis mercy that I implore of the Prince—mercy on behalf of the ruined Octavia!"

And having given utterance to these exclamations in a wild tone, and with a countenance evincing the poignancy of the anguish which rent her soul, Pauline sank upon her knees—covered her face with her hands—and burst into an uncontrollable passion of sobs, and tears, and bitter lamentations.

"Let her weep, Gabriel—let her weep!" whispered the Duchess hastily to the young nobleman, as he rushed forward to raise his well-beloved from that posture of despair. "This outpouring of her surcharged soul will relieve her."

And for some minutes Pauline continued to give way to her almost frantic sorrow.

But suddenly raising her head, though without moving from her knees, she looked up into Georgiana's countenance, exclaiming, "You have not told me whether my horrible suspicion be true! Perhaps I may be wrong—God grant that I am! Is my sister so deeply afflicted that she has lost her reason? Tell me, dear lady—oh! tell me—let me know the worst—or else give me instantaneous relief by the assurance that my fears have exaggerated the evil!"

And as she thus spoke, the beauteous creature twined her outstretched arms round the form of the splendid Duchess of Devonshire,—every lineament of the anguished countenance expressing the intense anxiety with which the response was awaited.

"My dear girl," said her Grace, profoundly affected, "your surmise is indeed too true! But, in the name of God! tranquillise yourself——"

"No—I cannot become tranquil!" exclaimed Pauline, springing straight up like a galvanized body. "Something must now be done—a decisive course must be taken—I can deceive my father no longer! He is not at home now—but he will return presently — and then—oh, *then*," she added wildly, "I shall throw myself upon my knees before him—I shall tell him all—and I shall implore his forgiveness on behalf of my poor ruined sister!"

She paused—seated herself on the sofa—and appeared to reflect profoundly for upwards of a minute.

At length Lord Florimel approached her: and, taking her hand, he pressed it to his lips, saying, "My beloved Pauline, I beseech—I implore you to compose yourself. All may not be so bad as you imagine——"

"It is impossible that the aspect of my poor sister's position can be worse, Gabriel," interrupted the young maiden, in a tone of profound feeling; and then followed another outburst of indescribable anguish.

"Listen to me, my sweet young friend," said the Duchess of Devonshire, when the violence of this new paroxysm of Pauline's affliction had somewhat subsided: and placing herself by the young lady's side on the sofa, Georgiana took her hand with every demonstration of affection, observing, "You are endowed, Pauline, with a strong mind and excellent sense—and I am certain that you will look this misfortune courageously in the face. For that any harm which happens to your sister, becomes a misfortune to yourself, I am well aware—so great is the affection existing between you both. But what course does prudence now recommend? That the veil of secrecy shall be drawn as completely as possible around this lamentable occurrence—and that the world shall not be suffered to learn the real cause of Octavia's affliction. She is now in a comfortable retirement—surrounded by all the gentle ministrations and affectionate attentions which friendship can suggest and which her position demands. An eminent medical practitioner devotes himself to her cure; and he last evening declared to me most solemnly that in a few weeks' time her reason will be re-established, provided his regimen receive no hindrance nor interruption. It would, therefore, be imprudent, my dear Pauline, to think of visiting your sister at present. As for cherishing sentiments of vindictiveness against the Prince of Wales, your own good sense will show you how useless and ineffectual such a project must prove,—while its only result would be to proclaim to the world your beloved sister's dishonour. Respecting your father, my dear Pauline," continued the Duchess, her tone becoming more tender and soothing as she proceeded, "I will myself undertake to communicate the distressing intelligence to him;—and I will guarantee that he shall pardon his afflicted daughter—pardon you also for having in any respect withholden from him the truth."

"Her Grace speaks fairly and kindly, Pauline," said Lord Florimel; "and you will do well to leave the matter entirely in her hands."

"Yes—I will follow your advice, dear Gabriel," returned the young maiden; "and to your ladyship," she added, addressing herself to Georgiana, "my eternal gratitude is due for all the generous interest you have taken and are still taking in this lamentable affair. But tell me about my dear

sister: is she melancholy or excited?—and where is she?"

"Octavia is at a charming little villa which I possess in Buckinghamshire, at no considerable distance from Aylesbury," replied the Duchess. "Respecting the state of her mind, I must inform you that there are times when she is dreadfully excited—and others at which she falls into a black despair."

"Poor Octavia!" murmured Pauline, the tears streaming down her cheeks, and her lovely bosom heaving with the sobs which half choked her.

"But as I have before stated," continued Georgiana, "she is under the charge not only of kind attendants, but likewise of a skilful physician; and you may be assured, my sweet young friend, that the moment Dr. Clarges gives his permission for you to visit her, I will myself come and fetch you in my carriage for that purpose."

In this manner did the Duchess of Devonshire and Lord Florimel exert themselves to sooth the afflicted mind of the younger Miss Clarendon; and in the course of an hour she became considerably tranquillised. They were then all enabled to converse more calmly and seriously upon the unhappy event which had occasioned Pauline so much sorrow; and the Duchess of Devonshire took an opportunity to hint that she was the bearer of such good tidings for Mr. Clarendon in one sense that he would be partially consoled for the evil intelligence awaiting him in another.

Thus did three hours pass away; and the timepiece on the mantel was striking four, when a hackney-coach drove up to the front-door, and Mr. Clarendon alighted.

But instead of immediately entering the house, he turned to hand a lady from the vehicle; and this fair companion, taking his arm, passed into the dwelling with him.

Another minute—and the drawing-room door being thrown open, Mr. Clarendon and Fernanda appeared upon the threshold; and the former, leading his companion towards Pauline, said, "My dear child, this lady has consented to ensure my happiness by becoming my wife: it is for you to welcome her to that home over which she will henceforth preside with the dignity, grace, and kindness natural to her character."

CHAPTER CV.

MR. CLARENDON.

It would be impossible to describe the astonishment, amounting to a positive shock, which Pauline experienced as this strange announcement fell upon her ears. The colour forsook her cheeks, and she stood motionless and pale as a statue, her eyes fixed vacantly upon Fernanda: then a crimson glow suddenly suffused her countenance—her bosom rose and fell rapidly—and her looks settled upon her father's features, as if to read the truth therein and convince herself that she was not being made the victim of a heartless joke or cruel mockery.

To Fernanda this scene, brief though it were, was far from agreeable—especially as she immediately recognised the Duchess of Devonshire and Lord Florimel, with both of whom she was acquainted; but, with characteristic self-possession and firmness, she took Pauline's hand, saying, "Have you no congratulations to offer to your father, if not to me? But we shall be friends—very good friends, dear girl—when you come to know me well."

These words recalled the maiden to a sense of the necessity of demonstrating her obedience towards her parent's wishes, as well as her respect for the choice which he had made and the step which he had taken: she accordingly endeavoured to make a suitable reply to Fernanda's speech and give utterance to some words of welcome and congratulation;—but the thought suddenly flashed to her mind that while her father was bringing home a young and beauteous bride, her sister was suffering under the most cruel affliction. A torrent of tears choked her utterance—and, staggering back a few paces, she would have fallen heavily, had not Lord Florimel caught her in his arms and supported her to the sofa.

Mr. Clarendon's countenance became black with displeasure—and Fernanda turned white and red a dozen times in half a minute.

But the Duchess of Devonshire hastened to approach them, and taking the hand of the latter said, "My dear friend, I congratulate you—most sincerely congratulate you, upon the alliance which you have formed—as I have not the slightest doubt that you have therein consulted your own happiness. Being an old friend of your aunt Lady Desborough, I am naturally interested in your welfare; and I therefore rejoice that accident should have led to my being here so opportunely to offer my felicitations. You will present me to Mr. Clarendon, Fernanda," added her Grace, with a sweet smile.

The introduction took place; and the Duchess hastened to say, as she glanced towards Pauline, "Mr. Clarendon, you must not misinterpret your daughter's feelings. She is too good, dutiful, and affectionate a girl not to be contented and satisfied with any step which you may take to ensure your own happiness; and therefore the embarrassment which she evinced at first and the emotions which she is experiencing now must not be attributed to a wrong cause. The truth is, Mr. Clarendon," added Georgiana, "she has this afternoon received intelligence that is only too well calculated to afflict her; and circumstances rendered me the unwilling bearer of these evil tidings."

"Evil tidings!" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, throwing a glance of anxious inquiry upon the countenance of the Duchess of Devonshire.

"Alas! it is too true," replied her Grace: "and these tidings equally regard you. But I have likewise some welcome intelligence to impart; and therefore I must crave a few minutes' interview with you alone."

Mr. Clarendon glanced towards his bride to see what effect these mysterious words on the part of the Duchess produced upon her; and it instantaneously struck the shrewd and far-seeing Georgiana that the favourable portion of what she had to communicate would materially please, as indeed it now materially interested Fernanda in her capacity as Mr. Clarendon's wife.

With admirable tact and judgment, therefore, did the Duchess of Devonshire hasten to observe, "When I say that I request an interview with you alone, Mr. Clarendon, I do not mean to exclude your fair bride from our conference."

Fernanda's countenance now brightened up; and

Mr. Clarendon led the way to an adjacent apartment, Lord Florimel being thus left to console his well-beloved Pauline in the drawing room.

"I have already hinted," said the Duchess of Devonshire, when she was alone with Mr. and Mrs. Clarendon, "that the nature of the communications which I have to make is two-fold. On one side there is a great calamity—on the other an amazing piece of good fortune. I will not however insult you, Mr. Clarendon, by intimating that the latter will entirely compensate for the former: but as you are a man of the world and doubtless entertain that laudable ambition which animates the breasts of all human creatures, you will doubtless perceive in the favourable tidings a certain atonement as well as solace for the evil intelligence."

"I beseech your Grace to explain yourself at once," said Mr. Clarendon, trembling all over with nervous anxiety and suspense.

"In the first place," continued the Duchess, "you must prepare to hear unpleasant news respecting your elder daughter, Octavia."

"Ah! what of her?" ejaculated Clarendon, the feelings of a father suddenly vibrating painfully to the ominous sound of words which appeared to herald the revelation of a misfortune.

"Your daughter—your elder daughter—the lovely and fascinating Octavia," said the Duchess, solemnly, "has been seduced!"

"Impossible!" cried the wretched man, bounding upon his chair as if a bullet had penetrated his heart. "She is virtue itself!"

"Alas! alas!" exclaimed Georgiana, "her virtue has yielded to the influence of love and temptation——"

"Meledictions upon the man who has blighted that fair flower!" thundered forth the enraged father, springing from his seat and gesticulating with awful vehemence.

"Stay! stay!" cried Georgiana, catching him by the arm. "He who has thus deeply injured you in one sense, has vouchsafed a royal act of bounty in another——"

"A *royal* act!" repeated Clarendon, catching at the word which seemed to afford an instantaneous clue to the solution of the mystery that was connected with his daughter's shame. "What am I to understand from your Grace's observation? Has Royalty so far honoured me as to debauch my daughter?" he demanded, with a laugh of almost maniac bitterness.

"Cease this useless excitement," said Fernanda; "and let us hear what atonement is offered. For that reparation of some kind is intended for the injury thus done you in the person of your daughter, is evident from the language of her Grace."

"Atonement — reparation!" murmured Mr. Clarendon, sinking down into his seat again. "Well—let us hear it! May it please your Grace to continue," he observed, half ironically, as he threw a wild glance upon the Duchess of Devonshire.

"I pray you to look upon me as a messenger of peace and conciliation," said Georgiana, stifling the resentment which rose up in her bosom at Mr. Clarendon's ungracious manner. "Your daughter Octavia had the misfortune to attract the notice of the Prince of Wales—and in a moment of love and passion, he triumphed over her virtue. But unfortunately the calamity does not end there. On Wednesday last Octavia sought an interview with her royal lover—and the excitement of the scene which ensued has temporarily impaired her reason."

"Holy God! what do I hear!" exclaimed the unhappy father, once more springing from his seat.

"My lord, I implore your lordship to be calm and composed!" said the Duchess of Devonshire, in a tone of suitable significancy.

"Ah! what do I hear?" ejaculated Mr. Clarendon, turning towards her Grace with an abrupt start. "Was it to me that those sounding titles were addressed?"

"To whom else could I have spoken?" asked Georgiana, with a sweet smile. "I have revealed to you the injury—and I now proclaim the atonement. The Prince has inflicted the wound—and to the extent of his power he administers the anodyne. Permit me, then, to congratulate your lordship upon your elevation to the peerage;—and here is the patent of nobility which confers upon you the title of Baron Holderness."

The newly-created peer received the parchment from the hands of the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire: but he took it mechanically, staring upon her vacantly at the same time. It was evident that he could not believe his own ears, nor dared to trust his own eyes: he fancied that he was dreaming, and feared to utter even a word or make an abrupt movement lest he should awake and thereby dissipate the golden vision.

But Fernanda snatched away the parchment—tore it open—and was in a moment convinced that the Duchess of Devonshire had indeed spoken truly. The patent of nobility was drawn up in due form, and conferred upon Walter Octavius Clarendon, Esquire, the style and title of Baron Lord Holderness, to be had and held by himself and male heirs so long as his posterity should exist. A document on foolscap paper was annexed to the patent; and the hasty glance which Fernanda threw over the former, showed that the peerage was accompanied by the grant of a pension of two thousand pounds a-year, "for services rendered at divers times and in sundry manners to the Sovereigns of these realms by the ancestors of the said Walter Octavius Clarendon Baron Holderness, and likewise to enable him to maintain the dignity of his peerage."

A glow of mingled pride and joy suffused the countenance of Fernanda; and her husband, observing the animated expression of her features, no longer remained sceptical with regard to his good fortune. Taking the papers from her hand, he perused them with attention; and by degrees, as he read, the colour came to his sallow cheeks — the light of ineffable satisfaction and triumph gleamed in his eyes—his nostrils dilated—his chest expanded—and a thrill of ecstasy passed over his frame as he felt that the object of all his ambition was suddenly and most unexpectedly attained.

Forgotten was Octavia—unheeded now were her wrongs;—and, elate with boundless satisfaction, the newly-made peer expressed his gratitude to the Duchess of Devonshire for having been the bearer of the welcome tidings which now alone engrossed his attention. Turning towards Fernanda, he saluted her by the name of Lady Holderness and embraced her as fervently as if they had been courting for years and had married through love: then, flinging open the door and holding the papers in his hand, he hurried to the drawing-room to announce his good fortune to his younger daughter

and inform her that she was now the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon.

The young lady was seated upon the sofa in earnest conversation with Lord Florimel, when her father burst into the room.

"My dear child," he exclaimed, running up to her and catching her in his arms,—"congratulate me! I am now one of England's peers—no longer the obscure and humble Mr. Clarendon, dependent on the bounty of a haughty relative — but Lord Holderness with two thousand a-year. Congratulate me, I say, dear Pauline——"

But the young maiden withdrew herself abruptly, and even violently, from her father's arms;—and, surveying him for a few moments with a troubled countenance and a swelling bosom, she said, "Is it possible you can rejoice to-day after all that the Duchess of Devonshire must have revealed to you?"

Then back to the memory of Lord Holderness flashed the remembrance of his ruined and demented daughter: and, while a sudden pallor swept over his countenance, he staggered back a pace or two as if he were about to fall. But almost instantly recovering himself, he exclaimed, "Oh! our dear Octavia's secret shall be hushed up—and with kind treatment she will soon regain her mental equilibrium. We must not be hard upon the Prince—he is not to be judged by the same rules to which ordinary men are subject—and besides, has he not done all that lies in his power to make reparation and atonement?"

"Oh! my dear father," cried Pauline, in a rending tone of anguish, "can you find consolation in such wretched sophistry as this? Here on my knees—before you," she exclaimed, sinking down at his feet and joining her hands beseechingly, "do I call upon you to reject with scorn the bauble that has been offered as a recompense for the ruined honour of your elder daughter! Oh! I can understand it all—this peerage and this pension——"

"Silence, child!" ejaculated Lord Holderness: "it is for *me* to judge what I ought to accept or refuse—and not for *you* to dictate. Rise, I command you——and let me have no more of this puling sentimentalism!"

For a few moments Pauline remained like a kneeling statue, transfixed and paralysed with the shock occasioned by her father's language. Her upraised countenance, pale as marble, denoted amazement blended with terror and grief: and her arms remained outstretched to their full length, the hands being joined.

But suddenly her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed fire in a manner never seen before with respect to her: and, rising hastily from her suppliant posture, she said in a low thick voice, "Father, am I to understand that you accept this peerage and this pension as the recompense for our Octavia's dishonour?"

"Silence, child—I command you to be silent!" exclaimed Lord Holderness, his countenance growing livid with rage.

"Then this house is no longer a home for me," said Pauline, her features once more becoming ghastly pale—her whole form quivering with the strong spasms that shot through her heart—but her voice nevertheless indicating the firmness of a heroine and the self-devotion of a martyr. "Farewell, father—farewell! Not for worlds would I bask in the sunshine of that coronet which has been thus ignobly purchased; not to save myself from starvation would I eat a morsel of bread bought with the pension given as a reward for my poor dear sister's ruin! Farewell, father—I will pray for you morning and night, as heretofore: but your house can no longer be my home!"

She paused for a few moments, and cast a rapid look around. In the features of Florimel she read the rapture of that admiration and worship which her noble conduct excited in his soul: in the countenance of the Duchess she observed an expression of approval which her Grace could not subdue. But she saw that her father was dogged and morose; while his newly-wedded wife, Lady Holderness, stood by his side darting fierce and implacable glances upon the heroic maiden.

Then Pauline, advancing towards the Duchess of Devonshire, said in a tone of mingled confidence and entreaty, "Your Grace will afford me an asylum for a few hours until I can repair to the abode of my sister?"

"Ponder—reflect, Pauline," exclaimed Georgiana: "think of the step you are taking!"

"Then you refuse me an asylum?" said the young maiden, turning away: and as her eyes filled with tears, she was about to address herself to Lord Florimel, when the Duchess, who was naturally of unbounded generosity, caught her in her arms and embraced her tenderly.

"Yes—come with me, dear Pauline," exclaimed Georgiana: "and not only for a few hours—but for days, and weeks, and years may you command a home beneath my roof."

"A thousand thanks!" murmured Pauline, bursting into tears. "One moment—and I shall be with you!"

And she hurried away to her own chamber to put on her bonnet and scarf.

But as she was about to quit the drawing-room, Lord Holderness stretched out his hand to retain her—for his heart suddenly gave way at the thought of losing his youngest-born thus!

"Let the wilful girl have her own way!" said Fernanda sharply, as she caught hold of her husband's arm and drew it back.

And Lord Holderness made not another effort to induce Pauline to alter her determination.

Two minutes elapsed, during which not a word was spoken in the drawing-room.

At the expiration of that time a servant entered, and addressing himself to the Duchess, said, "Miss Clarendon is already seated in your Grace's carriage."

Florimel and Georgiana accordingly took their leave of Lord and Lady Holderness; and the newly-made peer, deprived of both his daughters, was left alone with his bride—that snake with the lovely skin!

CHAPTER CVI.

THE SANCTIMONIOUS CONCLAVE.

It was about three o'clock on the same day when the preceding incidents took place; and in the vestry-room of Salem Chapel five very religious-looking gentlemen were assembled round a table, on which there were several papers and tracts and likewise some smoking tumblers of rum-punch.

On one side of the board sate the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, looking more sanctimoniously demure and puritanically miserable than ever, in spite of the exhilarating influence of the potent beverage whereof he was partaking.

Facing this pious man, sate the equally estimable Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, who was making certain alterations in a manuscript which lay before him, and in which task he was guided by the suggestions of his reverend leader.

On Mr. Sneaksby's right hand was placed Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins—that chosen vessel who fulfilled the duties of Secretary to the New Light Tract Distribution Society. Honoured he no doubt was—but honorary he was not: for his secretaryship brought him in 300*l.* sterling a-year;—and in addition to this lucrative office, he held a few other pleasant and remunerative little posts — such as Chairman of the New Light Coal Club, at 50*l.* a-year—Treasurer to the New Light Blanket and Soup Donation Society, at 35*l.* a-year—Auditor to the Salem Religious Extension and General Proselytism Fund, at 60*l.* a-year—Corresponding Secretary to the Botany Bay New Light Branch Society for the Conversion of Felons, at 100*l.* a-year—Sole Manager of the New Light Interment and Funeral Procession Society, at 60*l.* a-year—and Assistant-Secretary to the New Light Society for the Introduction of Moral Picture Pocket-handkerchiefs into the Army and Navy, this last office producing the worthy gentleman a salary of 25*l.* a-year. It will therefore be seen that Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins had some very strong and substantial reasons indeed not only for sticking as close as wax to the New Lights but also for praying morning, noon, and night, that their prosperity would endure for ever!

Next to Mr. Ichabod Paxwax sate Mr. Jonathan Crick, an outline of whose career was given in *Case the First* in the Secretary's Report at the grand meeting of the New Lights in the Strand. He was

a man with a countenance unnaturally elongated by continuous studied attempts to assume a sanctimonious aspect; and thus the corners of his mouth were so drawn down that he always seemed as if he were inwardly whimpering. In fact he appeared to have clothed himself in moral sackcloth and ashes, if we may be allowed the expression; and whenever he spoke, it was in such a whining, drawling, canting tone that a stranger would have fancied he was ready to burst out crying.

Between this meek and lowly vessel and the pluralist Mr. Tumpkins, sate the Rev. Unthank Snag, Mr. Sneaksby's pious assistant in the performance of the duties at Salem Chapel; and when we assure our readers that in looks, voice, dress, manner, and character, he was fully worthy to form an item in the influential Society of New Lights, we shall be pardoned if we enter into no detailed description of his many qualifications.

"Brother Paxwax," said the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, "open the door gently—peep forth—and let us know whether the godly are assembling in their tens, their twenties, and their hundreds."

"Verily will the meeting be crowded," answered the gentleman thus appealed to, after he had satisfied himself, by peeping forth in the way suggested, that the chapel was filling rapidly. "I hope, Brother Sneaksby, that your discourse will be as strong, as powerful, and as potent as—as——"

"As this rum-and-water," meekly observed Mr. Crick, perceiving that Brother Paxwax was at a loss for a proper simile.

"Thank you for the hint, my dearly-beloved brother in the good cause," said Ichabod. "Yea, verily—thy discourse must resemble this compound which men call punch," he continued, addressing himself to Mr. Sneaksby: "strength must preponderate even as the rum in our glasses, where the sugar likewise typifieth the sweetness of expression which will pervade thine exhortation; and the dash of the lemon will have its parallel in the slight sarcasm which thou wilt deal against all other sects save our own."

"Brother Paxwax," said the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of awful solemnity; "in limning the features of my intended discourse unto the ingredients of thy punch, thou hast omitted all mention of the hot water."

"I am justly rebuked," returned Ichabod, with an air of contrite humility. "But even as the boiling element maketh bubbles rise to the surface, so will thy discourse cause the shillings to ascend from the pockets of the godly."

At this moment there was a low, respectful, and timid knock at the vestry-door; and Mr. Paxwax hastened to respond to the summons. Opening the door a few inches, he beheld Mrs. Piggleberry in company with a pretty young woman of modest appearance and whose age might be about twenty.

"This dear creetur, good sir," said the widow, in a subdued and lachrymose tone, as she glanced towards the girl, "is my niece—my own brother's darter; and she's got no care or thought for her futur' state: so it struck me that I'd bring her with me this blessed Saturday afternoon to see if there wasn't no means of convertin' her into a state of grease."

"Yes, my good woman," answered Paxwax, peering through the narrow space to which he had opened the door; "we'll assuredly find means to bring your niece to a state of grace. But you must wait one minute—for my brethren here are at this moment under the inspiration of the spirit and cannot be disturbed."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax closed the door: whereupon he himself and his sanctimonious companions hastened to gulp down the remainder of their rum-punch—having disposed of which, they hastily concealed the glasses in a cupboard. Mr. Paxwax then returned to the door, and gave admittance to Mrs. Piggleberry and her niece—the former of whom was struck with awe and the latter with confusion on thus entering into the presence of this solemn conclave.

The five saints fixed their eyes upon the countenance of the blushing girl; and Mr. Unthank Snag's mouth watered as he observed her cherry lips—while Mr. Jonathan Crick looked as suddenly pleased as an antiquated goat.

Mrs. Piggleberry repeated her desire that her young relative should be brought "to a state of grease," as she denominated the procedure whatever it might be: and Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, after consulting his watch, observed, "There is verily time to commence the good work, Mrs. Piggleberry: retire thou back again into the chapel—and leave thy niece for a short time in the holy atmosphere of this council-room of the elect."

The worthy widow curtseyed and withdrew accordingly: and if every one of her senses had not been absorbed in the religious awe which swayed the ignorant, confiding old creature, she could not possibly have failed to sniff an egregious odour of rum in that "holy atmosphere."

The niece was so surprised at being thus suddenly left by her aunt that she was for some moments rooted to the spot: then, suddenly recovering herself, she would have hurried after Mrs. Piggleberry, had not the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby interposed his gaunt form between herself and the door, exclaiming, "Fear not, young woman: thou art with the godly!"

The girl's confusion now changed into a sense of the ludicrous and an inclination to burst out laughing in the face of the demure spiritual leader of the New Lights: but he, taking her hand, said, "Come with me, O wayward lamb whom the good sheep hath entrusted to my care; and I will become thy shepherd!"

Thus speaking, he led her into a small inner room where the surplices and black gowns were hanging, and where all the crockery was kept for the "tea-meetings" and "love-feasts" of the New Lights; and closing the door behind him, the reverend gentleman bade the young woman be seated. This invitation she accepted—entertaining no alarm at being in the company of so pious an individual, but being rather curious to hear what he could have to say to her.

"Fearing that thou would'st be confused, poor lamb, in the presence of my brethren," he commenced, once more taking her hand and keeping it in his own as he placed himself in a chair close by her side,—"I did bring thee into this privacy that we might converse in a blessed security and a holy peace. Tell me, young maiden, what is thy name?"

"Ann Jones, please sir," was the prompt reply: and as she spoke, her cherry lips revealed two rows of large but white and even teeth.

"And hast thou ever felt the spirit stirring within thee, Ann?" inquired Mr. Sneaksby, approaching his countenance towards her own.

"I don't know what you mean, sir," she said,

drawing back: for the pious gentleman fixed upon her a look which filled her with confusion.

"Verily and thou art a comely creature," he continued; "and thou shalt be welcomed amongst us as one of the fairest of our flock. Suffer that I bestow upon thee the kiss of peace, sister."

And, throwing his arm round her neck, the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby embraced the young woman, who was too much astonished at the sudden and unexpected nature of the proceeding to offer the slightest resistance or even give utterance to an ejaculation.

"Now, beloved sister in the good cause," said the pious minister, "thou hast received the kiss of peace; and henceforth art thou one of the chosen vessels of the Lord. Thy life shall be savoury and pleasant; and if thou requirest shekels of silver or shekels of gold, come unto me and I will succour thee. Say, then, thou well-favoured Ann,—wilt thou be as a sister unto me?"

"If you behave kind and good, I've no objection," answered the young woman. "But keep your hands off!"

"Nay—verily, I meant no offence, Sister Ann," said Mr. Sneaksby. "With me you cannot err. I am now your spiritual pastor—and whatsoever I recommend, *that* must you perform—whatsoever I do, to *that* must you submit. Behold! thy shawl is not new and thy gown is of humble material. Get thee fitting raiment, dear sister, according to thy taste; and here is the gold wherewith to purchase the same."

As he uttered these words, the reverend gentleman put three or four guineas into the hand of the young woman, who could scarcely believe in her good fortune: for her parents were very poor—chiefly dependent on Mrs. Piggleberry—and unable to furnish their pretty daughter with an apparel calculated to set off her beauty to its greatest advantage.

"Put away the coin, my well beloved sister, in a secure place," said Mr. Sneaksby. "Dost thou wear a pocket? No. Well—and thou dost not carry a bag. Ah! a thought striketh me!—heaven never leaveth me at a loss for an idea to meet an emergency. Conceal the gold in thy bosom—it will be safe there. Yea, verily—in all brotherly feeling, I will show thee how to deposit it securely."

And, suiting the action to the word, the pious gentleman thrust his hand into the young woman's dress—a proceeding which she had not courage to resent after his generosity towards her. At the same moment the door was opened a little way—and the Rev. Unthank Snag slowly protruded his head, saying, "Brother Sneaksby, hast thou brought the stray lamb to a state of grace?"

"Verily, she is upon the road thither," returned the spiritual chief of the New Lights, hastily withdrawing his hand from the place into which it had intruded and where it was lingering somewhat longer than was necessary. "I will rejoin thee in a moment, Brother Snag."

"The godly are growing impatient in the chapel," observed this reverend assistant; "and in the gallery especially the blessed elect are stamping and shuffling with their feet. The beloved vessels are anxious for the meeting to commence."

Having given this intimation, Mr. Snag shut the door again and returned to his seat in the vestry-room.

"Now attend to my counsel, dear Sister Ann," said Mr. Sneaksby, the instant he was once more alone with the young woman. "Thou wilt find a true and valuable friend in me—one who, having much experience in all good and pleasant ways, will teach thee many things agreeable unto thyself. But thou shalt place a seal upon thy lips: yea—even unto thine aunt and thy parents shalt thou be dumb respecting the gift of these guineas which I have given thee."

"Dear me, sir—I'm sorry for that!" exclaimed Ann, who had already pictured to herself the particular pattern of the dress which she should choose: "the money is totally useless to me unless I can spend it."

"Assuredly it is made to spend, beloved sister," answered Mr. Sneaksby: "but thou canst say that thou didst pick it up in the street—or that some lady took a fancy to thee and gave it—or that thou hast done needle-work in secret and earned the wage of thy labour. One of these excuses shalt thou make: for verily there is no harm in such trifling deception as that. Did not Abraham pass off his wife as his sister?—and yet he lost not the love of heaven on that account. Neither shalt thou, Sister Ann: and in following my counsel thou wilt act wisely."

"Oh! leave it to me to manage the matter, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Piggleberry's niece. "I shan't mention your name at all—and I thank you kindly for your goodness towards me."

"Another kiss of peace," said Mr. Sneaksby: and the young woman offered not the slightest resistance and exhibited not the least resentment, as the pious gentleman refreshed himself with the sweets of her rosy lips.

She doubtless felt herself bound to permit his feelings to find free vent in this manner, after the handsome present he had made her. In fact, it is impossible to say to what greater length the caresses might have extended, had not the Rev. Mr. Unthank Snag again protruded his head slowly and discreetly into the room,—closing his eyes to the little peccadilloes of his pious superior,—but saying, "Brother Sneaksby, the vessels in the gallery are stamping their feet in the exuberance of their pious impatience!"

"Damn the vessels!" muttered the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby, seized with a momentary fit of irritability: but instantly recovering his self-possession, he said in his habitual canting drone, "Dear Brother Snag, I come to hold forth to those blessed souls which are thus yearning for my spiritual counsel!"

Miss Ann Jones heard the oath that the reverend gentleman had let slip: and she was certainly amazed to a degree. But, feeling that it was no concern of her's and entertaining a great admiration of Mr. Sneaksby's generosity, she offered no comment on the little occurrence. The pious minister snatched another kiss from her lips—and then suffered her to depart, bidding her rejoin her aunt in the chapel.

As she passed through the vestry, she averted her head from the four saints who were seated there—a hasty glance having shown her that they were greedily devouring her with their eyes: and, on re-entering the chapel, she found her aunt anxiously awaiting her return.

"Well, my dear Ann," said the worthy Mrs. Piggleberry in a low whisper, when they were seated together in a pew, "has that pious vessel begun to bring you to a state of grace?"

"Yes—that he has, aunt," replied the young woman, in a joyous under-tone: "and I think he'll succeed altogether soon if he goes on in the same way he has begun."

"Heaven be thanked!" murmured Mrs. Piggleberry, clasping her hands and turning up the whites of her eyes as if she were going into a fit.

At this moment the vestry-door was thrown open; and the leaders of the New Lights came forth into Salem Chapel, which was densely crowded from floor to roof. The Rev. Mr. Sneaksby and the Rev. Mr. Snag, each in his black gown, walked first: the Secretary, Mr. Gotobed Tumpkins, was immediately behind them;—and Messrs. Paxwax and Crick brought up the rear. A subdued murmur of applause greeted their entrance—the nature of the occasion permitting such an expression of feeling on the part of the congregation, inasmuch as the meeting was rather for business purposes than of a religious complexion. Indeed, it was a "Special Assemblage of the Elect," convened "to take into holy and pious consideration the state of the funds connected with Salem Chapel and other matters deeply important to the progress of the good cause."

The Rev. Unthank Snag ascended the reading desk, while the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby slowly and demurely hoisted himself up into the pulpit: Messrs. Tumpkins, Paxwax, and Crick took their places in the Elders' Pew.

Mr. Paxwax gave out a hymn, with a request that it might be sung to the tune of the Old Hundreth: but the congregation manifested a complete independence and a remarkable freedom of opinion in this respect—chaunting the hymn to all possible tunes, real or imaginary. However, the discordant harmony, if we may be allowed so antithetical an expression, passed off to the satisfaction of all present; and at the conclusion of the melody, Mr. Snag invoked a blessing upon the proceedings.

The Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby then rose in the pulpit and commenced his address.

He said that the chosen had been summoned for the purpose of considering the state of the funds specially belonging to the Chapel. Those funds were in a very unsatisfactory condition, and must be augmented. The voluntary contributions during the past year had only amounted to 2000*l.*: the rent absorbed 250*l.*—repairs 150*l.*—lighting, washing surplices, organist, sextoness, and petty cash, 300*l.* Then there were 300*l.* expended in vestry refreshments and in "love-feasts;" and thus 1000*l.* were accounted for at once. The other 1000*l.* had furnished a bare maintenance for himself (Mr. Sneaksby) and his revered coadjutor Mr. Snag. (*Marks of deep sympathy.*) Now it was absolutely necessary that he (Mr. Sneaksby) should have a suitable dwelling near the Chapel. Salem would not prosper without it: the welfare of the New Lights was at stake! Heaven knew that he could content himself with a garret to dwell in and a crust to eat: but the honour, credit, and respectability of the sect itself were compromised. A thousand pounds would build a couple of neat houses in the vicinage of the Chapel: one at 600*l.* for himself—the other at 400*l.* for his assistant, that chosen vessel Unthank Snag. (*Marks of deeper sympathy.*) Now this sum of 1000*l.* must be raised for the purposes named. All money was the Lord's; and some was now needed for the Lord's work. Let the congregation, then, put their hands into their pockets and pull out the Lord's money!

Having expatiated in this manner at great length Mr. Sneaksby sate down; and while Mr. Paxwax began to make a collection in a silver plate on one side of the chapel, Mr. Crick performed the same duty on the other.

Half-crowns, shillings, sixpences, and pence rattled quickly into the plates; and here and there some good old gentleman or pious elderly lady dropped in gold. The organ played a tune the whole time that this process was going on; and the sextoness sate with her back against the closed doors of the chapel, to prevent any one from sneaking out in order to avoid the contribution of his mite to the fund.

At length the collection was over; and the money was counted out in the Elders' Pew. Then Mr Gotobed Tumpkins wrote down the amount on a slip of paper, which was handed up to the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby.

"Christian friends—brothers and sisters," exclaimed this pious man, starting up in the pulpit and evidently labouring under great excitement: "I am ashamed of you! Yes—deeply though it afflicts me thus to speak, I am a man of truth—and the truth must be told. Therefore do I repeat that I am ashamed of you! The collection amounts to a paltry 200*l.* Blessed Salem, which is crowded in every point, holds two thousand persons; and two thousand persons have subscribed two hundred pounds! I am ashamed of you! This will not do. Sextoness, keep the door! The Lord's money is in your pockets, Christian brethren and sisters; and you must pull it out. The Lord wants his money—and it must be forthcoming. Brother Paxwax—Brother Crick—take round the plates again."

A dead silence followed this harangue: but it was soon broken by the rattling of more coin in the silver plates, as the deputed collectors passed from pew to pew. Superstition has its emulation as well as its influence;—and, instead of the whole congregation being indignant at the address which had just issued from the pulpit, each individual now felt his honour compromised and his faith tested. The feeling with each was therefore to outvie the rest in munificence; and those who had previously given copper now contributed silver—while they who had given gold in the first instance, now presented Bank-notes.

Meanwhile the organ played a lugubrious tune—the sextoness leant firmly against the closed folding-doors—and the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby sate bolt upright, with a severe and even menacing countenance, in the pulpit; while Mr. Snag appeared to be putting up a silent prayer to heaven to open the hearts—or, in another word, the purses—of the congregation.

The second collection was completed—the money was counted—and the sum total was handed up to Mr. Sneaksby, as before, on a slip of paper.

Intense was the anxiety with which the assembled New Lights now contemplated their revered pastor. The organ had ceased—and a pin might have been heard to drop in the chapel.

"Christian friends—brothers and sisters," said the pious gentleman, rising with sanctimonious solemnity and without excitement; "I am cheered—I am refreshed in spirit—I am inspired to gladness, by this change in the aspect of affairs. I am no longer ashamed of you. To all do I waft the kiss of peace! The subscriptions now amount to 450*l.* The Lord's money has to some extent come out of your pockets. I ask no more on the present occasion. With this

instalment the buildings may be commenced forthwith; and when the funds are exhausted, you will be convoked to give up a further portion of the Lord's money. Yea—verily do I repeat that I am no longer ashamed of you: on the contrary, my heart is exceeding glad—and my soul is proud of the conduct you have just displayed. Dear Christian brethren—beloved Christian sisters—let the kiss of peace pass amongst ye!"

The word being thus given, the congregation listened to testify their devotion to their spiritual leader by obeying his commands with the utmost alacrity. For heaven knows the kiss of peace did indeed pass amongst the assembled New Lights; and such a hugging, smacking of lips, and murmuring of pious joy arose throughout the chapel that the scene must have hugely delighted the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby, as he surveyed it from the dignified height of the rostrum. Old men embraced young women—young men bestowed their caresses on ancient dames—and we need hardly say that in those cases where both parties were young, the kissing was in every respect as enthusiastic as the best friends of the New Lights could have possibly wished it to be. A few bonnets were crushed — some wigs were thrust away — and the ringlets of one or two false fronts were pushed over the eyes of the wearers: but these trifling mishaps occasioned not the slightest murmur—so acceptable was the kiss of peace wherever it was received!

Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, in his capacity of Senior Elder of Salem, now read a Report, which the conclave had cooked up in the vestry-room previously to the meeting, and which set forth the precise state of the funds as already glanced at by Mr. Sneaksby. The document proceeded to recommend an unwearied agitation in the cause of the New Light doctrines, and insisted on the necessity of obtaining ample pecuniary means for this blessed religious militancy. The Report accordingly suggested that each member of the Congregation of Salem should have a Subscription Card, ruled in columns for £. s. d., so that the names of donors and the amounts of donations might be readily entered.

The Rev. Mr. Unthank Snag now gave out the pleasing intelligence that a love-feast would be holden in the chapel on that day three weeks, at six o'clock in the evening, on which occasion it was hoped that the New Lights would muster in great strength. This announcement was received with a low hum of applause: the doxology was then sung —and, the old sextoness having abandoned her post at the door, the congregation were suffered to depart.

CHAPTER CVII.

THE ROYAL GEORGE.

Ten days had elapsed since the Magsman and Big Beggarman embarked on board the brig in the Mersey; and during that interval the ship had pursued its way towards the western hemisphere.

At first a favourable wind and tolerably fine weather had attended upon the course of the *Royal George;* and thus for a week considerable progress had been made in the voyage. But a change then took place: the steady breeze broke into fitful gusts of violent fury—the heavens grew black and menacing—the ocean rolled in dark and sombre waves—and every sign familiar to the seaman's experience denoted the coming storm.

Over the surface of the troubled main swept the screaming bird;—and on the tenth evening the sun went down a deep blood-red colour, like a lamp of evil omen extinguishing beneath the mighty arch of heaven which now overhung the boundless ocean like a tremendous sheet of lead.

In the captain's cabin the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were seated at the table, upon which stood the drinking materials that were prevented from falling off by a rim running above the surface all around the board: for the vessel was now tossing up and down on the undulating bosom of the Atlantic.

A lamp was suspended to the ceiling of the cabin: but through the stern windows the white crests of the billows could be discerned like moving masses of snow gleaming in the obscurity—and from time to time the spray dashed against the thick glass.

The rapid trampling of the sailors upon deck—the responses which they gave to the commands which the captain thundered forth—the rattling of the cordage—the shaking of masts and spars—the frequent fluttering of the sails—the din of the rudder beating occasionally against the stern of the vessel—the tremendous oscillation of the tiller—the straining of the timbers from one end of the vessel to the other—the changing voices in which the gale spoke—now dull, low, and mournful as if with subdued moanings—then loud, bursting, gushing, roaring, raging, as it swept over the Atlantic,—these were the sounds which fell upon the ears of the two men as they sate smoking, drinking, and conversing alone together in the cabin.

And although their discourse was of a private and particular nature, no necessity was there to speak in whispers: for so great was the din without—in the ship, upon the ocean, and in the air—that there were intervals when the two men could not hear themselves speak;—and thus, even if a listener had been stationed on the other side of the door, with his ear to the panels, he could not have overheard a syllable that was uttered in that cabin.

It was now about eight o'clock on this memorable evening—and the anger of the storm was rapidly increasing to a perfect fury.

But, comparatively unmoved by the elemental war, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were deliberately digesting projects well suited to the appalling nature of the night that was heralded by a blood-red sunset and an evening of tempestuous heavens.

"Well, then—you're decided on doing it without any unnecessary delay?" said the Big Beggarman, as he refilled his pipe and pressed down the tobacco with his thumb.

"This very night, Stephen," responded the Magsman. "There's no use in waiting any longer—and since our plans are pretty well decided on——"

Here the gale drowned the remainder of his sentence.

"Now let us look the whole thing calmly and coolly in the face once more," said the Big Beggarman, after a long pause: "so that we may calculate all the chances that's for us and all that's against us."

"Good!" exclaimed Joe Warren: "there's no-

thing like holding a proper council of war. In the first place, then, we must reflect that you and me are only two on one side against the captain and nine men on the other."

"That's two against ten," observed the Big Beggarman, gloomily.

"And ten strong, sturdy fellers that don't know what fear is," added Joe Warren. "But this is only the dark side of the picture. The light side is more flattering than t'other is discouraging. In the first place we must make away with the captain."

"That's easy enow," observed the Beggarman. "He has quite lost all his mistrust of us—and by waiting so patiently before we made up our minds to do anything or take any step, we've quite lulled asleep any suspicion that he might have entertained."

"You're right there, Stephen," responded the Magsman. "That he did look upon us in a very queer fashion at the beginning, is very certain: or else he wouldn't have made us give up our pistols the first night we were on board the ship. But by degrees his fears wore off: and then he let us go upon deck the second day and chat with the sailors. Well, our first move, as we were saying, is to make away with him: and then we must serve the chief mate in the same manner. That's not impossible to be done, as I explained to you yesterday."

"But then we shall have eight sturdy mariners to deal with," said the Beggarman.

"They'll be paralysed when we tell them what we've done and what we mean to do," rejoined Warren, in a tone of desperate ferocity. "After all," he continued, at the expiration of a few minutes, during which a tremendous gust swept over the ocean and the vessel went careering down into the abyss like a maddened race-horse—then up the mighty steep of waters again at a far slower rate,—"after all, we ain't he men to stand upon trifles, Stephen—and if it comes to the scratch, we must fight a bloody battle, even though the odds will be eight to two when the captain and first mate are put out of the way."

"Aye—it won't come to such a desperate combat, when we think calmly of the business," said the Big Beggarman. "The men will knock under as soon as they see that their chief officers are gone and that we're resolute. Besides, the hope of plunder and the excitement of the new kind of life which we shall propose to them——"

"That's the very point which I rely upon!" ejaculated the Magsman. "But let us still look at the worst. With arms in our hands, friend Stephen, there ain't two more formidable fellers on the face of this earth than we are——"

"Well, I rather think not," interrupted the Beggarman, complaisantly. "And as to getting the weapons to use in case of necessity, there won't be much difficulty on that score—for the captain always carries pistols secreted about him. *That* we know for a certainty."

"And there's always half-a-dozen cutlasses on deck, round the foot of the main-mast," added the Magsman: "for though the captain's suspicions have been lulled asleep, as you observed just now, he hasn't omitted the necessary precautions in case we should suddenly show our teeth. But *his* precautions will be *our* safeguard: that is to say, we shall know where to lay our hands upon weapons at the proper moment. After all said and done, I shan't be sorry in the long run that the nobleman, whoever he was, played us this infernal trick. The first night we came on board, when I opened the letter which I expected was to contain Bank-notes for the fifteen hundred due to us, I was cursedly savage to find that it was a bill payable in New York only."

"And I wasn't best pleased when I opened my letter at the same time and found the same thing," observed the Beggarman. "It was a deuced good plant to compel us to go out to America and reconcile us to our fate in that respect. But we've hit upon a plan that'll upset all the nobleman's fine schemes," added the ruffian, with a horrible chuckle.

"I should think so indeed," exclaimed the Magsman. "We'll not only get our fifteen hundred pounds each in New York—but we'll also get the ship and everything in her. The cargo must be worth some thousands. And therefore, as I was saying just now, I'm not so particularly sorry after all that his unknown lordship has tried this plant upon us. Had we received our money in good Bank-notes upon coming on board, and if no restraint had been put upon us, we should have quietly left the ship again and stepped back on British ground, contented with the cash we'd realized. But now the treachery practised towards us, has instigated us to treachery likewise; and there's more than one person that'll be made to rue the——"

Here the Magsman's voice was drowned in the roar of the tempest which increased a thousand fold all the terrible noises that we have enumerated above.

But soon after the rage of that tremendous gust had spent itself, there was a long interval of comparative lull: and, the door of the cabin suddenly opening, the captain of the vessel made his appearance.

His rough garments were shining with the spray which had dashed over him: the water dropped from the wide brim of the low glazed hat which he had substituted for his cap with the gold-lace band;—and his dripping hair hung lanky and straight over his ears. His countenance was more rubicund than ever; and his aspect altogether was that of the weather-beaten, sturdy tar to whom storms were familiar and tempests a source of not unpleasurable excitement.

"Well, my hearties," he exclaimed, in a voice which was hoarse and thick from the effects of bawling out his orders upon the deck amidst the din of the elements,—"you manage to make yourselves pretty comfortable—eh? That's all right—and I thought I'd just step down to see how you was both getting on. It blows great guns, by jingo!"

"Won't it be a nasty night, captain?" demanded the Magsman.

"Rough enow," was the laconic response, as the captain shook himself like a dog just emerged from the water. "But there's nothin' to fear, my hearties," he added at the expiration of a few moments: "a good ship and plenty of sea-room—that's all one wants to make everything safe and trim."

"You'll take a dram, captain—eh?" said the Big Beggarman.

"Just to keep the cold out," observed Joe Warren. "Come—sit down there, and I'll mix a stinger for you."

"Well, I don't mind staying a minute or two

with you," returned the skipper, taking the seat which the Magsman officiously vacated for his accommodation: then, pulling off his hat and unbuttoning his heavy pea-jacket, he said, "This is the eleventh voyage I've made in this here boat across the Atlantic without any mishap—and so I'll drink success to the present wentur'."

"And we'll jine in," observed the Big Beggarman, catching the rapid glance of terrible significancy which the Magsman at the same moment darted upon him.

"Well, here's success, then," said the captain, raising to his lips the tumbler which Joe Warren had filled with grog for his behoof.

"I shall drink that toast in a bumper," exclaimed the Beggarman, helping himself to a copious supply of the rum.

"And so will I," said the Magsman, receiving the bottle from his friend's hand.

But, quick as thought,—and as if suddenly obeying a galvanic impulse,—Joe Warren grasped the bottle by the neck and raised it above his head as if it were a short club. The captain perceived the movement in an instant—saw the intended treachery—and sprang to his feet,—thus encountering as it were half-way the tremendous blow which the ruffian dealt him with the bottle. Crash it descended upon the seaman's head—and into a thousand pieces it flew. A cry burst from the victim's lips, as he staggered back, the blood pouring down his face and blinding him with its sanguine flood: and, although half stunned, he mechanically thrust one hand into the inner pocket of his pea-jacket to clutch a pistol.

But, like a tiger springing upon its prey from the thicket of an Indian jungle—or as the boa-constrictor flings itself from a bough on the traveller passing beneath—did the Magsman rush upon the doomed mariner. Down they fell together, a savage growl escaping from Joe Warren's breast; and at the same moment the Big Beggarman, falling on his knees, fixed his iron grasp upon the captain's throat.

Like two demons did the murderers appear as they did their awful work,—one keeping the victim down, despite of his desperate struggles and agonised writhings—the other throttling him in his savage gripe,—the former gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth with the ferocious excitement of the deed—the latter with compressed lips and corrugated brows indicating all the tremendous power of the muscular energy which his entire frame furnished to accomplish the task of strangulation.

And in the meantime the roar of the tempest had recommenced; and the terrors of the storm were added to the horrors of that foul iniquity.

'Twas done: and the captain lay lifeless on the cabin-floor—his countenance livid and blue—his eyes starting from their bloody sockets.

Springing to their feet when they were assured that the death-struggle was ended, the two murderers took possession of their victim's pistols. Then they opened one of the stern-windows; and, raising the corpse between them, they threw it forth into the ocean which was now lashing itself up into foaming fury. The waters sucked in the dead body—and at the same instant a tremendous wave beat against the stern of the vessel. To draw down the wooden lids protecting the ports in which the windows were set, was now the work of a few moments with the Magsman and the Big Beggarman; and having done this, their eyes met with looks of savage triumph, as they saw in the assassination of the captain the accomplishment of the first and most important step in their grand nefarious scheme.

"Now, Stephen," said the Magsman, as he examined the priming of the pistols and assured himself that it was quite dry—the great rough coat of the captain having effectually defended the weapons from the spray which had beaten over their owner when he was alive and performing his duty upon the deck,—"now, Stephen, you must go up above and play your part as already agreed on."

"I understand, old feller," responded the Big Beggarman, putting on his hat as firmly as possible so as to encounter the fury of the gale: then, having tossed off a dram of raw spirit, he quitted the cabin, closing the door behind him.

On ascending to the deck, the atmosphere was at first so dark that the Big Beggarman could distinguish nothing: all seemed black as if the air were a solid mass of pitch. But in a few moments his eyes began to grow accustomed to that dense obscurity; and the masts, spars, and cordage gradually stood out in lines of jet against the inky sky. The forms of the seamen appeared like black objects of uncouth shape; and the bulwarks of the vessel stretched forward on either side until they seemed lost in the darkness at the farther extremity.

The wind was howling, sweeping, and roaring in all the variations of its voice of terror: the spray beat over the deck—and the motion of the ship was so great that the Big Beggarman would have speedily lost his balance had he not in the first instance clung to a rope, and then made a rush as it were to the main-mast.

Unobserved by the sailors, who were bustling about performing the orders issued from the lips of the first mate, the Big Beggarman hastily secured under his coat all the cutlasses which were kept in a rack upon the after-deck. He then availed himself of a temporary lull in the hurricane to make his way up to the spot where the chief mate was standing; and in a tone of apparent frankness and haste, he said, "The captain has been taken suddenly ill down in the cabin, sir, and wants to speak to you directly."

"The deuce! what's the matter with him?" demanded the chief mate.

"He was seized with a shivering all over and fell down in a sort of fit," was the Big Beggarman's ready response. "But he's rallied a little by having rum poured down his throat—and now he wants to speak to you."

The mate, totally unsuspicious of treachery, instantly summoned Mr. Watkins, a subordinate officer, whom he ordered to take charge of the ship for a few minutes; and he then hastened down the companion-ladder, the Big Beggarman following close behind him. Opening the door, he entered the cabin: but scarcely had he crossed the threshold, when he was knocked down by a huge bludgeon which the Magsman had obtained by breaking off the leg of a stool. The Big Beggarman rushed in—shut the door behind him—and, drawing a cutlass, made a desperate sweep with the trenchant blade at the unfortunate officer as he was starting up from the floor. A yell of agony rang from the victim's lips,—a yell which reached not the ears of those on deck, or, if it did, was mistaken for one of the thousand tones in which the voice of the tempest speaks

upon the ocean. But even before that appalling sound had ceased to vibrate on the ears of the murderers in the cabin, their terrible work was accomplished—the deed was done—and the mate became the second victim of the tremendous tragedy of this night of horrors!

From one of the stern-windows the gory corse was thrust into the ocean; and once more did the assassins exchange looks of ferocious satisfaction and diabolical triumph.

But now came the most hazardous portion of their enterprise,—a crisis which must decide the attitude that the crew would take towards them! Still the miscreants quailed not in the presence of the danger which they were incurring: but enhancing their natural courage by means of the artificial stimulant supplied by the burning alcohol which they poured copiously down their throats, they prepared for the worst with an undaunted energy worthy of a better cause.

Each arming himself with a drawn cutlass and a loaded pistol,—and having secreted the other swords in the bedding of one of their cots, so that those weapons should not at least become immediately available to the sailors,—the Magsman and the Big Beggarman ascended to the deck.

Watkins, the second mate, who had been left in charge of the ship, was standing close by the man at the wheel; and the other sailors were distributed about in different parts of the vessel according to the nature of the duties which they were at the moment called upon to perform.

The instant Joe Warren and the Beggarman put their feet upon the deck, they hastily accosted the second mate and the steersman; and presenting their pistols, exclaimed, "Dare to move from your posts and we will blow your brains out! Silence—speak not a word—and your lives shall be spared!"

The suddenness of a proceeding so utterly unexpected—the determined manner in which the two ruffians spoke—and the cold contact of the muzzles of the pistols against the foreheads of Watkins and the steersman, so completely astounded these individuals that the injunction of silence was in reality perfectly unnecessary: terror and amazement had already sealed their lips!

"One word is as good as twenty," said Joe Warren, now acting as spokesman. "The truth is, then, that we have made away with the captain and the first mate—and we mean to take possession of the ship or die in the attempt. If you fall into our views, well and good: we'll sell the cargo first—share the spoil—and then hoist the black flag and turn pirates. But if you resist, we'll continue the bloody work that's already begun, by murdering you both. Now what say you?"

"Who's to command the ship?" inquired Watkins, who had by this time recovered his presence of mind and who now spoke with promptitude and decision.

"You shall be the captain," answered the Magsman,—"on particular conditions; and Bradley the steersman shall be first mate. Now, then—speak—what say you?"

"I agree," returned Watkins, unhesitatingly.

"And so do I," said the helmsman, whose name was Bradley.

"You both swear most solemnly that you fall into our views?" demanded the Magsman.

"We swear," was the resolute and firm response.

"All right!" exclaimed the Magsman, withdrawing his pistol from its menacing vicinage to the head of Watkins—while the Big Beggarman simultaneously released Bradley from the like state of jeopardy.

The scene which we have just related scarcely occupied two minutes. The action was prompt—the discourse was rapid, brief, and to the point;—and the understanding was therefore speedily come to and settled. None of the other sailors had overheard the conversation or noticed that anything unusual was going forward: for, in the first place, they were too far off to be within ear-shot of the words spoken on the after-part of the deck, especially in the midst of a roaring sea and a gushing hurricane—and, secondly, the night was much too dark to permit them to catch even a glimpse of the naked cutlasses or the pistols which the two murderers wielded. There were thus six more men in the ship to win over by fair means or coerce by foul; and Joe Warren did not doubt a successful issue to the adventure in either case.

"Now summon three of the men, captain," he said to Watkins, "and tell them what has occurred."

This order was instantly obeyed; and the three sailors whom Watkins called aft, heard with mingled feelings of terror and surprise that a mutiny had taken place on board—that their legitimate commander and first mate had been murdered—and that their adhesion was required to the new condition of things, under peril of their own lives. Two of them, influenced by the promises made and the hopes held out, instantaneously signified their assent; while fear induced the third to adopt a similar course. They were then ordered to stand aside, while the remaining three sailors were summoned in their turn to receive the startling communication of all that had occurred on board within the previous quarter of an hour; and the result was completely satisfactory to the Magsman and the Big Beggarman.

Copious allowances of spirits were now dealt round; and the tragic mutiny was succeeded by boisterous hilarity on board of the *Royal George*.

But still the storm continued: the wind swept in tremendous gusts over the Atlantic, whose bosom was upheaved into waves that ran mountains high;—and presently the lightning flashed forth in vivid brilliancy, and the thunder rolled with a crashing din as if a thousand chariots were tearing along a brazen bridge.

CHAPTER CVIII.

THE PORTRAIT.

We now return to the Countess of Desborough—that charming, beautiful, and strong-minded woman, whose passions were however more potent than her reason, and whose temperament had plunged her, after many, many successful struggles against temptation, into the vortex of love's voluptuous enjoyments.

For the attachment which she cherished towards Ramsey amounted to a fervent enthusiasm that would have conducted her all-smiling to the stake, had it been necessary to die for him,—a love not only arising from a sense of his manly beauty and

rom the happiness enjoyed in the burning moments of sensual delight, but also from admiration of those graces of manner and intellect which so pre-eminently characterised the resuscitated convict!

Three weeks had elapsed since accident first threw in her way the man whom she knew only as Gustavus Wakefield: and a fortnight had now passed since she surrendered herself to his arms. During this period her love had become enhanced into a frenzy; and her husband must have been perfectly blind if he had not perceived the worship with which his beauteous Eleanor regarded their guest. But she had never once paused to reflect whether her conduct were not calculated to excite her husband's suspicions: yielding to the torrent of pleasure and ecstacy that bore her soul along and bathed her senses in a tide of unutterable bliss, she had no thought for anything save this delirious dream of delight—no consideration for any one save the man who had thus suddenly become the emperor of her heart.

It will be remembered that Fernanda Aylmer returned to her uncle's mansion immediately after the failure of the midnight attempt which she made to poison Arthur Eaton, on that occasion when William Dudley introduced her to his young master's apartment: but having remained for a few days beneath the roof of her noble relatives, Fernanda departed suddenly, with the avowed intention of visiting the Earl's seat in Derbyshire. It was on the morning of the very day when his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales dined with Lord and Lady Desborough, that Fernanda had thus quitted the mansion in Berkeley Square: and from that time her relatives had heard little concerning her, until the astounding intelligence was conveyed to them, by means of a hurried note which she had written, that she had become the wife of Mr. Clarendon—or rather Lord Holderness.

The Earl of Desborough, when he began to reflect calmly upon the matter, was not sorry that his way-

ward, volatile, and perverse-tempered niece had thus settled herself in life and at all events formed an honourable connexion: and he could not help thinking that Arthur Eaton had experienced a somewhat fortunate escape in being refused by a young lady of so strange, wild, and self-willed a disposition. As for the Countess of Desborough—she was too much absorbed in her passion for Ramsey to devote many minutes' thought to Fernanda: and moreover on the Saturday evening when the tidings of the young lady's marriage reached Berkeley Square, Eleanor was completely wrapped up in the enjoyment of her lover's society after an absence of three days on his part.

For our readers will remember that on the previous Thursday night Ramsey had appeared to Mr. and Mrs. Page in the library at Stamford Manor; and that visit to the neighbourhood of Aylesbury had certain objects which will transpire hereafter.

On the Saturday evening he came back to Berkeley Square—his departure and his return both taking place at dusk, when his countenance might be effectually concealed by the shadow of his hat and the collar of his cloak. But need we say that in the meantime his absence had appeared an age to the enamoured Eleanor, and the three days had seemed as many centuries? All the next day she remained at home on purpose to enjoy his society—the excuses which he made for not going out, proving quite satisfactory to herself, and eliciting no remark on the side of her husband. Indeed, the Earl of Desborough had sought the solitude of his library more than ever since the arrival of Ramsey at the mansion: and had Eleanor found leisure to observe her husband's manner or notice his personal appearance with any degree of attention, she would have perceived beneath an air of extreme kindness towards herself and of affability towards her lover, there was a profound melancholy devouring the nobleman's very vitals,—and that his cheeks were growing pale, his form emaciated, and his brow furrowed, with a rapidity that was but too awfully perceptible to all about him save his own adulterous wife and her unprincipled paramour.

Having recorded these few necessary observations, we now resume the thread of our narrative.

It was on the Monday following the Saturday on which Ramsey had returned to his comfortable quarters in Berkeley Square; and at about three o'clock in the afternoon we find him seated in the drawing-room with the lovely and loving Countess of Desborough.

Her ladyship had instructed the domestics that she was not "at home" to any visitors: and she was accordingly giving herself up to all the blandishments of a *tête-a-tête* with him whom she called her "dear Gustavus." Her splendid eyes looked burning fondness and enthusiastic passion upon him; while his reflected the more sensual feeling and fixed their gaze on her countenance with a fervour which she mistook for unalloyed affection as profound and intense as her own.

Never had she seemed more beautiful, nor he more handsome; and so far as personal appearance went, there was a remarkable fitness in this couple for each other. Their dark hair—olive complexions—large black eyes—brilliant teeth—and classical outline of feature, made them look like brother and sister: while the ardour of their temperament and the strength of the fires that burned within their breasts, rendered them suitable partners in the dalliance of love.

"Tell me, my Gustavus—do you indeed entertain for me all the fondness which breathes in your words and gives a glory to your looks?" asked Eleanor, in a tone that was low and tremulous with the soft feelings that prompted the question.

"Can you doubt my love?—do you suspect the truth of my vows?" said Ramsey, modulating his own voice to the tender sensuousness of the scene: and taking the hand of the Countess, he fastened his lips upon the warm, plump flesh which thrilled with the ecstatic fervour that animated her entire being. "Should not I rather question you, my beloved Eleanor," he continued, "respecting the permanence of that attachment which you now feel towards the friendless stranger?"

"Ah! how can you speak in this mournful, hopeless manner of yourself, Gustavus?" exclaimed the Countess, darting upon him a look of mingled devotedness and reproach. "Wherefore use the word *friendless?* Am not I your friend?—would I not lay down my life to serve you? Oh! my beloved Gustavus, you had forgotten that there was such a being as myself in the world when you made that observation."

"Pardon me, dearest—dearest Eleanor," said the resuscitated criminal, folding that charming and elegant woman in his embrace and imprinting a thousand kisses upon her glowing, burning, blushing cheeks. "I had not forgotten you," he continued in the murmuring tone which indicates the strength of sensual passion: "no—never, never can I forget you, my beloved—never can I cease to remember that you are the only being whom I ever truly adored and by whom I was ever loved so tenderly in return. All my hopes of happiness are centred in thee, Eleanor: were I doomed to separate from thee, my well-beloved, I should end my days in the blood of a distracted suicide."

"Oh! speak not in such dreadful terms as these!" whispered the Countess, her own voice being subdued and hushed by the power of her passion: and, half-reclining in his arms, she gazed long and ardently upon the handsome countenance of her lover, while the beatings of her heart were plainly audible to the ears of both. "Wherefore should you entertain an idea of even the possibility of our separation? Are you not happy beneath this roof?—do you pant for change, Gustavus?"

"No—no: ten thousand times no, my angel!" he responded, accompanying his words with fervid caresses. "How can I possibly pant for change? Oh, no! no! But ask yourself, dearest Eleanor, whether this state of bliss can endure for ever? Does it not appear like a dream which must inevitably have a waking? Your husband——"

"Oh! let us not talk of him!" exclaimed the Countess, with a movement of impatience. "Ever since I possessed your love, Gustavus, I have experienced feelings amounting almost to a loathing and a bitter aversion in respect to him."

"I can well understand those emotions, sweet Eleanor," answered the wily criminal: "but you must pardon me if I persist in speaking of the Earl for a few moments. Oh! cannot you guess what I mean?—can you not divine that I allude to the possibility of our love being discovered? Each day—each hour we become less guarded: already

has that possibility amounted to a probability—and in another week or ten days it will be an inevitable certainty. Will not the time come, then, my ever dear Eleanor, when we must look all this in the face and determine how to meet the emergency?—and will it not be better to find ourselves prepared how to act, instead of being left to the irresolution which invariably accompanies the excitement and the confusion of a sudden discovery? Nay, more—would it not be even preferable to anticipate the catastrophe?"

"To what do you allude?—what do you mean?" demanded the Countess, now for the first time awakening somewhat from her delicious dreams of bliss, and starting back almost in affright from the precipice on which she found herself standing. "You have some plan in your mind—some project, Gustavus——"

"Hear me calmly, my love," interrupted Ramsey, again lavishing upon the charming patrician lady the most tender and ardent caresses—so that the cheek which rested against his own glowed with animation, and the eyes which looked up into his were filled with a lustrous languor, melting yet full of fire. "I beseech and implore you to contemplate, dear Eleanor, the results of a discovery," he continued. "My ignominious expulsion from the house would be the first step taken by your enraged husband—and who knows but that he might sacrifice you to his fury? Then—Oh! then, what would become of me? I should destroy myself—and our love would terminate as fatally as our deaths would be premature!"

"Alas! alas! there is indeed much truth in this prophetic picture which you have drawn, Gustavus," exclaimed Eleanor, snatching herself from his embrace and gazing upon him in mingled terror and entreaty. "Tell me—Oh! tell me, I conjure you, what course you would have us adopt—what plan you would recommend."

"Eleanor," said Ramsey, in a tone that was solemn and even awe-inspiring,—"you have given me every proof of an ardent love—and you have declared that you would die to serve me. But you shall live to bless me: we will live for each other! Oh! can you not comprehend what I would suggest?—do you not understand the nature of the sacrifice which you must make for this love of our's?"

"Speak—speak, Gustavus!" exclaimed the Countess, vehemently. "What would you have me do?"

"Fly with me!" was the resolute and yet solemn answer.

"Oh! my God—must it come to *that*?" cried the lady, bursting into tears and wringing her hands. "Must this love of our's bring disgrace upon me——"

"If you hesitate, Eleanor," interrupted Ramsey, "it is that you love me less than you love the brilliant position which you occupy in the world of fashion. In this case I will leave you—the sooner the better—ere my heart breaks——"

"Leave me! O cruel Gustavus—why give utterance to such menaces?" exclaimed Eleanor, painfully excited. "No—you shall not leave me—we will not separate! I am happy with you—I shall be wretched without you. What to me is the gay and splendid sphere of rank and fashion? Have I not abandoned it for these two weeks past in order to be constantly in your society? Oh! you know not yet how profound is woman's love—you have not learnt to appreciate the immensity of her affection! But I will teach you the lesson, Gustavus—and you shall receive from me a far greater proof of my tenderness than any I have yet been able to afford you. For I will surrender my good name in order that I may keep your love—I will fling fame and reputation to the winds, sooner than be separated from thee! Yes—all that woman values most dearly will I resign for your sake,—home, friends, relations, and the world's adulation—and what is more still, the world's respect! Now will you believe that I love you?"

And as she gave utterance to these last words, the patrician lady started from her seat—and drawing herself up to the full of her queen-like stature and her noble height, she appeared radiant with triumph and overpoweringly beautiful in the Olympian effulgence which the glowing animation of her cheeks and the lustre of her eyes shed around her.

Oh! the broken ties of sacred matrimony—a ruined reputation—a cast-away future,—all, all were now dared and defied by this nobly-born woman who was courageous enough to immolate everything dear upon the altar of her still dearer love!

"Eleanor, I thank you—my God! I thank you, from the depths of my soul!" exclaimed Ramsey, sinking at her feet and covering her hand with kisses.

"Rise, my well-beloved!" she said, little dreaming how much of theatrical effect there was in *his* proceeding, but judging him by her own fervid sincerity and profound enthusiasm. "What I have pledged myself to do, I will perform without a murmur—and the sooner, the better, now that my resolution is taken. Pardon me, then," she continued in a more subdued tone and with a sudden embarrassment of manner, as she pressed her lover's hand affectionately,—"pardon me if I now turn the conversation for a moment upon things of worldly importance only. But it is necessary that I should inform you, my beloved Gustavus, that I am not independent of my husband in a pecuniary sense. A few hundreds of pounds—my jewels—these are all the wealth that I can take away with me; and I know that for the present your circumstances are not as prosperous as I could wish them to be."

"But I am young—and I am not wanting in certain intellectual qualifications," answered Ramsey. "I possess a perfect knowledge of the French language—and in the United States of America I may hope, as a tutor or as a translator, to earn a livelihood. And then—in addition to all this, I think I may safely say that by means of certain deeds in my possession I may obtain a considerable sum of money——"

"Oh! it grieves me to think that we are compelled to speak of the dross of this world in the same breath with love which is the gold of the heart's feelings!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Enough, then, upon that subject. You know *my* position, Gustavus—you are aware that it is little more than my profound affection which I can bestow upon thee. Oh! if my fortune were as immense as my love for thee, the wealth of the Indies would be pauperism in comparison therewith!"

"'Tis thy love only which I seek, Eleanor," responded the treacherous criminal, as he strained that confiding and noble-hearted woman to his tainted breast.

They now resumed their seats upon the sofa—

composed their countenances and their feelings as well as they were able,—and oh! how different were those feelings that animated them!—and they then began to settle their plans for an early flight from the British capital and from the English shores.

But in the midst of this conversation the Earl of Desborough entered the room; and, actually torturing his inward being with the efforts that he made to assume a calm and even smiling exterior, the deeply-to-be-pitied nobleman said, "That young artist, Eleanor, in whom, as you are aware, I have taken some interest, has brought a portrait which he wishes to exhibit to us. He assures me it is one of rather a startling character, though merely a portrait: but more he will not tell me until he removes the cloth which covers it. Will you not gratify his very pardonable vanity by consenting to inspect this work of art? And perhaps Mr. Wakefield will likewise honour him?" added the Earl, turning towards Ramsey.

"I should have much pleasure, my lord," replied this individual, who invariably found some handy excuse for avoiding a meeting with any strangers who visited the mansion,—"but I have a letter to write—of some importance, too—and I perceive," he exclaimed, glancing towards the time-piece on the mantel, "that I shall scarcely be enabled to save the post."

Thus speaking, he bowed and quitted the room.

"You will accompany me, Eleanor, to the parlour where Mr. Woodfall is waiting my return and your presence?" said the Earl, taking his wife's hand.

"Oh! certainly — if it will give you pleasure, Francis," she replied; a sudden emotion of pity—and even of remorse—springing up in her bosom at the idea that in a few hours she was to desert and abandon for ever the husband whose conduct had been characterised by unvarying kindness, generosity, and indulgence towards her.

The Earl grasped her hand somewhat tightly, as if with the impulse of one who feels that the hand so held in his own is trembling, and would therefore give it a reassuring pressure: then, leading her away from the room, the nobleman conducted his beauteous wife to the apartment where George Woodfall was seated.

The artist rose and bowed respectfully to the Countess of Desborough.

"Your ladyship will deem me very presumptuous," he said, "in venturing to solicit you to inspect that portrait,"—and he pointed towards the picture as it stood against a chair, wrapped up in the cloth in which he had brought it: "but as I believe that I have been more successful in this achievement than in any former effort of my pencil, I was vain enough to hope that your ladyship—and you also, my lord—would not be angry with me for submitting it to your opinion. It is a portrait—nothing more than a portrait;—but the portrait of a great criminal whose name recently produced no inconsiderable sensation throughout the country."

"And who may the hero of your picture be, Mr. Woodfall?" inquired the nobleman.

"Your lordship remembers the romantic trial in which the Aylesbury bankers figured as the culprits and Sir Richard Stamford as the prosecutor?" said the artist, interrogatively.

"Oh! perfectly well," was the Earl's prompt reply.

"And I, who cannot bear to read the accounts of criminal proceedings," observed Eleanor, "was deeply—or rather fearfully interested in that extraordinary trial! A lady of my acquaintance was present in the chapel on the morning when the condemned sermon was preached: and she assured me that one of the prisoners—Mr. Ramsey, I think—was a young man whose external appearance aroused feelings of the profoundest sympathy."

"I also was present on the sad occasion to which your ladyship alludes," said George Woodfall; "and it is Mr. Ramsey's portrait which I have painted from the recollection of his features. So vividly did they become impressed upon my memory, that I can at least take credit to myself for the fidelity of the delineation, whatever may be thought of the general workmanship."

Thus speaking, the young artist loosened the knots where the corners of the cloth were tied, and in a few moments withdrew the covering altogether.

The portrait was now revealed!

But—O horror!—Oh! the agonies—the appalling agonies of that moment, alike for the unhappy Earl and the maddened Countess of Desborough!

An ejaculation of despair burst from the former; but a wild cry, whose thrilling intonations betrayed all the excruciating anguish which tore her breast, broke from the lips of Eleanor—and, reeling half round, she fell senseless on the carpet.

"Cover up your picture—bear it away—this moment!" said the Earl, in a thick hoarse tone, and with a look of indescribable horror as he grasped Woodfall's arm convulsively. "We have recognised in that portrait some one whom we knew — under another name — and in earlier years —— But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself, lest in the excuses which he was attempting he might let drop something calculated to engender strange suspicions in the mind of the artist. "Pray leave us, Mr. Woodfall—pardon this scene—do not mention it elsewhere—it is very painful—and come and see me again in a day or two——"

While the nobleman was thus speaking in hurried and disjointed sentences and with a dreadful excitement of manner, Woodfall had replaced the covering over his picture; and he quitted the apartment just as the domestics, whose ears the thrilling scream of the Countess had reached, rushed thither to see what had occurred.

CHAPTER CIX.

THE OUTRAGED NOBLEMAN AND THE RESUSCITATED CRIMINAL.

PHILIP RAMSEY, unconscious of the terrible scene which had just occurred and of the appalling discovery that had been made respecting his identity, was pacing his own chamber—not with the agitation of alarm or of annoyance—but with the excitement of triumph and the restlessness that invariably attends even upon the flush of a proud success.

He had so admirably played the hypocrite that the treason he contemplated was now approaching its consummation: the noble woman, so basely deceived—so treacherously beguiled, had promised to fly with him;—the arrangements were settled—the plan was determined upon—and in a few hours would the appointed moment arrive at which she was to abandon her husband and her home for ever!

And why had the villain Ramsey thus plotted to annihilate all the little happiness that remained to the Earl?—why had he thus drawn the infernal meshes of his duplicity and deceit so completely around the confiding and generous-hearted Eleanor that naught but the last and most irreparable of woman's sacrifices would now content him?

His conduct was the result of cold-blooded calculations; and these calculations may be explained in a few words.

He knew that it was impossible for him to remain for ever beneath the roof of the Earl of Desborough. An accident—the merest chance—the slightest casualty, would betray him. Moreover, even if the tremendous secret connected with his real name, his true history, and his resuscitation from an ignominious fate,—even if this secret should remain undiscovered, was it not contrary to all rational hope that his amour with the Countess could continue much longer unsuspected or unperceived?

Thus, in either case and under any circumstances, Ramsey was living in the constant peril of expulsion from the home which he had found so miraculously and from the hospitality which he had abused so atrociously. The Earl's bounty had supplied him with some ready money: but this amount was totally insufficient to enable him to escape from the country and fly to some foreign clime. And yet he must lose no time in thus ensuring his safety!

What, then, was to be done? He had calculated that the Countess possessed costly jewels and at least some available pecuniary resources; and he resolved therefore to make her the companion of his flight. Besides, he had just so much regard for her as any profligate voluptuary experiences for a beautiful mistress: and he moreover thought it probable that a lady of her rank and connexions would never be left by her relatives without some amount of income, happen what might.

These were the calculations which the cold-blooded villain had made; and the reader is now in possession of the key to his conduct with regard to Eleanor. We have shown how well he succeeded in overruling the last scruples which remained in the bosom of the too confiding lady—and how triumphant was his persuasion that she who had already surrendered to him her honour in secret would make a public sacrifice of home, reputation, friends, and relatives, for his sake!

Glorying in that success—rejoicing in that triumph—Philip Ramsey was pacing his apartment, when the door opened slowly and the Earl of Desborough staggered into his presence.

The ghastly pallor of the nobleman's countenance—the strange workings of his features—the wild expression of his eyes—the visible convulsion of his limbs—and the tottering unevenness in his pace,—all these appearances instantly struck Ramsey with dismay and carried to his guilty soul the terrible conviction that some appalling discovery had been made.

The Earl closed the door carefully—locked it—and placed the key in his pocket.

A cold shudder passed over Ramsey's frame: for the idea flashed to his mind that the outraged husband had discovered his wife's frailty and was come to wreak a deadly vengeance on *him*, the seducer!

But respecting this apprehension the wretch was almost immediately reassured; for the Earl, pointing to a chair, while he himself sank exhausted upon another, said, "Be seated! Whatever now takes place between us must be without excitement—without noise—without passion."

"What does your lordship mean?" demanded Ramsey, with the eagerness of a torturing impatience to learn the extent of the evil which now appeared to menace him.

"I mean, sir," responded the nobleman, continuing to speak in a voice so changed with thickness and hoarseness that it sounded like the worn out tones of old age,—"I mean that the moment when any unguarded proceeding on our part shall make *your* secret public—that instant will disgrace and dishonour, scorn and ridicule, redound also upon *me!*"

"Ah! my secret—then you know me?" murmured Ramsey, the frightful spasm which shot through his heart making him feel as if the hand of death were there: and he sank helplessly into the chair which he had been invited to take.

"Holy God! is it possible that such a tremendous misfortune should have fallen upon my head—upon that of my wife also?" exclaimed the Earl, with a groan that convulsed his entire frame as anguish tore it from the depths of his soul. "But thou—unhappy man—in what haze of horror is thine existence enveloped?—in what appalling mystery is thy fate involved? Thou, whom the world believes to be cold and stark in the narrow tomb——"

"In mercy, spare me!" cried Ramsey, suffering all the crucifixion of ineffable torture as these words struck like a barbed arrow into his heart: and, with eyes glaring wildly and brows hideously corrugated, his whole countenance was distorted as if his neck once more felt the pressure of the accursed noose.

"Well—well—I will seek no explanation on *that* head," said the nobleman, exercising a partial command over his feelings by dint of a tremendous and almost superhuman effort. "Little does it matter to me by what means you escaped the vengeance of the law: all my thoughts—all my ideas—all my feelings should be absorbed in the immense amount of wanton and heartless injury which you have inflicted upon me."

"My lord, you will deal mercifully with me?" exclaimed Ramsey. "Am I not a worm already crushed so thoroughly beneath the iron heel of an avenging society, that you can afford to spare—if not to pity me?"

"Spare you I will—pity you I cannot!" rejoined the Earl of Desborough. "And in sparing you, I act not through any considerations of mercy—but in order to avert a public scandal and the world's scorn from my house! The imposture you have practised upon me is venial—oh! yes—and your condition in *that* respect might indeed have commanded my pity: for, on that fatal night when you became an inmate of my dwelling, had you thrown yourself on your knees before me—revealed to me the astounding secret that you were Philip Ramsey the convict—and demanded my forbearance and my succour, I should not have refused your prayer! But you have planted a poisoned dagger in the bosom of my wife—you have made her not only an adultress, but the paramour of a man whose neck has been circled by the halter of the gibbet! Oh! there is the accursed infamy of your conduct—there is the degradation—there

the damnable wrong which you have perpetrated!"

And the nobleman, covering his face with his hands, broke forth into the bitterest lamentations.

But Ramsey saw that he was safe—that no positive retribution was intended—and that the Earl was prepared to strain every nerve and put every possible violence upon his own feelings rather than suffer it to be known to the world that the resuscitated criminal had been his own friend and his wife's lover. Yes—all this the villain saw and comprehended; and so appalling had been his fears at first, that the joy occasioned by this assurance of impunity and sense of safety nearly overwhelmed him.

And now that he was thus relieved from the most rending apprehensions, he experienced an ardent curiosity to learn how everything had been so suddenly discovered. Could the Countess have repented, and betrayed the secret of her amour and intended flight? No—that was a conjecture inconsistent with her character, her love, and her strength of mind. Besides, the idea would not account for the detection of his imposture as Gustavus Wakefield, and his identity as Philip Ramsey. How, then, was the discovery made? The mystery was impenetrable: it defied all the efforts of imagination! Not for an instant did it strike him that the visit of the artist and the exhibition of the picture could have any connexion with the sudden catastrophe.

"Mr. Ramsey—or rather Mr. Wakefield," resumed the Earl, again exercising a mastery over his feelings,—"for it makes my blood run cold in my veins to call you by the former name,—matters have reached that appalling crisis when reproaches are a folly and an absurdity. No possible invective which my lips might frame, could convey an idea of the tremendous sense of diabolical outrage which my soul experiences. Words are useless in dealing with such a case. The wrong is inflicted: its nature is horrible to contemplate! But, Oh! with what excruciating bitterness of feeling must I admit that I myself was to a great extent the accessory to my own dishonour and to my wife's immeasurable shame. For I knew that you had become her paramour——My God! I knew it——and now my punishment is a hell of the heart's emotions!"

And, springing from his seat, the Earl began to pace the room with all the frantic agitation of one whose brain was turning.

But suddenly pausing in his demented walk, he confronted Ramsey, saying in a low hoarse tone, "The sooner we separate, the better. In another hour it will be dusk; and my travelling-carriage will be at the door. If you consent to repair straight to Liverpool and thence embark for the United States, my purse is at your command."

"Greedily—gratefully do I embrace the opportunity," exclaimed the resuscitated.

"Talk not to me of gratitude—profane not good words by breathing them with your polluted lips!" said the Earl, his voice now suddenly changing to a passionate vehemence as he surveyed Ramsey with looks of indescribable disgust and abhorrence. "Here are five hundred pounds for your use," he exclaimed, tossing down a purse heavy with gold and rustling with bank-notes: "and, by the living God! if you venture to remain in England—if you do not proceed in my carriage direct to Liverpool and thence depart without delay for America—I will show you no more mercy, but proclaim the fact of your existence to the world and set the blood-hounds of justice to hunt you to that destruction which you have escaped once!"

Having thus given vent to the menaces which his outraged feelings suggested, the Earl of Desborough quitted the room, banging the door violently behind him.

He repaired to his wife's chamber, which was darkened by the heavy curtains being drawn over the windows. Around the bed several persons were speaking in those solemn whispers in which words are exchanged by the couch of an invalid. Two physicians, a nurse, and three of the noble lady's female attendants were gathered there — watching the patient who was sleeping, but with an uneasy and convulsing slumber.

"What was the cause of this sudden fit?" inquired one of the physicians, addressing himself to the principal lady's-maid.

"I do not know, sir," was the reply. "The Earl and her ladyship were inspecting a picture in a room down-stairs, when suddenly a fearful shriek echoed through the house. We ran to the parlour from which it proceeded—and we found the Earl dreadfully agitated and her ladyship insensible."

"Ah! some family matter, doubtless," observed the physician.

"Is there any danger, sir?" inquired the lady's-maid.

"The greatest danger," was the prompt reply. "Your noble mistress has received a shock which may end fatally—or perhaps impair the nervous system for the remainder of her days——"

"Oh! my poor mistress!" sobbed the dependant, who was devotedly attached to Lady Desborough.

It was at this moment that the Earl entered the room; and, advancing on tiptoe towards the bed, he fixed his eyes with mournful earnestness upon the countenance of his wife. The maid-servants retired—and the nobleman, seating himself by the side of the couch, took Eleanor's hand in his own. It was cold—icy cold: he pressed it to his lips—he wept over it! Oh! the unhappy nobleman loved his wife tenderly—tenderly!

For upwards of an hour did he remain watching over her as she slept her troubled sleep. No rancour was in his thoughts with regard to her—no animosity in his looks: but he was all love, and affection, and pity, and compassion—that generous-hearted Earl!

At length, as a sudden remembrance struck him, he looked at his watch; and, gently abandoning Eleanor's hand, which all this time he had retained in his own, he issued noiselessly from the room. Hastening to an apartment the windows of which were in the front of the house, he looked forth into the Square.

The travelling-carriage was at the door: the postilion was already in the saddle.

A man, enveloped in a cloak, emerged from the house and entered the chaise, which immediately drove off—the occupant drawing up the blinds as it rolled away from the mansion.

Then some degree of relief was experienced by the Earl of Desborough, as he retraced his way to his wife's chamber: for the resuscitated criminal was no longer an inmate of his dwelling!

CHAPTER CX.

ROSE FOSTER AGAIN.

Five days had elapsed since that fatal night on which Rose Foster fell once more into the power of Mrs. Brace; and during this interval the orphan girl had been retained a close prisoner in a bed-chamber the windows of which looked upon the small yard that lay between the two houses. The door was kept constantly locked; and thus all possible precautions were taken against another escape.

Harriet the lady's-maid took her up her meals at the proper hours: but, although civil and obliging in her general conduct, the domestic held her peace when questioned by the terrified girl respecting the meaning of this imprisonment and the ultimate objects which Mrs. Brace might have in view concerning her. Vainly did Rose implore, through Harriet, an interview with the milliner, whom she hoped to be able to move with her entreaties and her tears if she could only see her: but Mrs. Brace went not near the afflicted, bewildered, and almost heart-broken girl.

Oh! how heavily—how wearily—and how miserably passed the time! By day the hours dragged their slow length along as if they were interminable; and by night the maiden could not sleep—for not only did the bitterness of her sorrow chase away slumber, but she feared to close her eyes lest some treacherous advantage should be taken of the moments of unconsciousness. Tears moistened her pillow—burning tears of anguish which afforded not the consolation that they usually impart when serving as a vent for grief,—but tears which flowed as it were from a heart gushing with a fountain of unextinguishable woe!

What had she done—this poor helpless, harmless girl—to be thus cruelly persecuted?—had heaven in her case forgotten its pledge to protect the fatherless?—or how had she deserved the infliction of so much misery? Her life had been pure and spotless: neither in word or deed had she ever offended against God or man;—and in those happier days which were gone apparently never to be recalled, she had dispensed her charities with no niggard hand. The poor mendicant had never been turned unaided away from the door of her parents' dwelling; and there were many, many kind acts which Rose had performed in secret but which were recorded in heaven's high Chancery to her account!

Alas! alas! she who had so frequently befriended the orphan, was now the victim of a bitter persecution in her own orphan state! Cold and cheerless was the great world to her: unblest seemed her lot—stern and rugged the path which her destiny traced out! A rose in beauty as well as in name, was she doomed to share the rose's fate and be plucked by the ruthless hand of the spoiler, to be scattered and strewn after having ministered to his evanescent caprice with its richness of perfume and its beauty of hue!

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon; and Rose was seated in her prison-chamber, with her head leaning upon her hand and her eyes fixed vacantly upon the floor. There were books on the table—there was a harp in one corner of the room—and there were materials for fancy-work at hand: but to none of her favourite recreations could the orphan turn her mind or direct her attention. Too deeply absorbed was she in her own sorrows to be able to follow in imagination the afflictions of the heroine of a romance: too harsh were the discordant notes that vibrated in her heart, to permit her feelings to hope that music would sooth them;—and the hands that were now so often wrung in despair could not be tutored to ply the needle!

Miserable—very miserable was the orphan;—and more than a hundred times in every hour did she wish that she was with her parents in that cold grave over which the roughest human foot may pass without injuring those who sleep beneath.

Suddenly the noise of the key turning in the lock fell upon the maiden's ear; and, starting from her reverie like a timid roe, she waited in breathless suspense and with affrighted looks for the presence of the visitor—this being an hour at which Harriet never was wont to make her appearance there.

The door opened—and Mrs. Brace advanced into the room with a smiling countenance and all her usual affability of manner.

"My dear child," she said, taking the orphan's hand and looking kindly upon her—so kindly that she must have been a very fiend incarnate if the honey of her smiles were belied by the venom in her heart,—"my dear child, I am come to see you at last! You have sent for me very often: but I have been so much engaged——"

"Oh! madam," exclaimed Rose, in a voice of the most touching pathos—withdrawing her hand at the same time,—"if you had any hope to give me or any humane feeling to testify towards me, surely you could have spared one single moment to become the bearer of the good tidings. But we will not exchange unnecessary words. Tell me at once—tell me, I conjure you—am I to consider myself a prisoner any longer?"

"*A prisoner* is not the proper term, my love," said the milliner, evasively. "You do not know who are your real friends: and therefore I was compelled to use a little restraint——"

"Compelled, madam!" exclaimed Rose. "Am I your slave—or your daughter—or your apprentice? No—I am none of these! By what shadow of right, then, do you exercise any control or coercion over me?"

"This is not language, my love, which it becomes you to utter or me to hear," said Mrs. Brace. "Do not excite yourself—I mean you no harm——"

"Madam," interrupted the orphan, with solemn earnestness of tone and manner,—"you do not know who I really am: but I will tell you!"

"Yes, my child—I am aware that Camilla Morton was but a feigned name," answered Mrs. Brace; "and that you are properly called Rose Foster. A sweet name is Rose—a name which I love dearly; and if you are a good girl and will only listen to reason, I will point out to you a path leading to such happiness that you will become the envy of all the other young ladies in my establishment."

"You know, then, who I am," said Rose, in a musing tone: "and yet you have no compassion upon the poor friendless orphan whose parents met with so dreadful a death! Oh! I am amazed—I am shocked: and if the world be full of such wickedness, suicide cannot possibly be a crime, inasmuch as it is the only means which heaven has placed in the power of the innocent and pure-minded to enable them to escape from ruin at the hands of

he cruel, the profligate, and the unprincipled! But since you know who I am, Mrs. Brace," exclaimed the orphan, with passionate vehemence,—"perhaps you are also aware that your friend Mr. Harley is none other than the Prince of Wales—the man whom circumstances point out as the moral murderer, although not the physical assassin, of my lamented parents!"

"Hush, my dear child—in the name of God! Do not talk in this wild and dreadful manner," said the milliner. "His Royal Highness wishes to see you—to throw himself at your feet—implore your pardon for the past—and learn in what way he can serve you for the future. Oh! you will find him contrite and full of sincere regrets;—and it will now be his joy and happiness, as well as his duty, to atone for all the sufferings which you have endured through any misconduct or indiscretion on his part."

"Is this possible?" exclaimed Rose, who, despite of the bitter experience which she had recently had of human perfidy, was still too artless, ingenuous, and confiding to suppose that the world's iniquity, hypocrisy, and deception could extend much farther.

"It is so possible, my dear child," answered Mrs. Brace, "that his Royal Highness will be here in an hour to confirm all I have just told you. Compose yourself, therefore, to receive him—and you will yet find that much happiness is in store for you."

Having thus spoken, the milliner pressed the young maiden's hand and hurried from the room: but as the key once more turned in the lock, a damp fell suddenly on the orphan's spirits and a secret voice appeared to whisper to her that she was again betrayed!

Yes—a flood of misgivings poured in unto her soul, for why should she still be retained captive?—and why was the Prince about to visit her in that bed-chamber?

But now a desperate energy nerved the friendless girl;—and, remembering with a species of heroic exultation the tremendous exploit that had saved her on the former occasion, she looked around for the means of escape. Alas! none met her view—no plan suggested itself! Useless were it to dare a second descent from the window. Such a proceeding would only land her in the yard, where her recapture must be inevitable.

But—ah! what hope is this which strikes her?—what scheme suddenly springs into existence in her mind?

Wild and romantic idea!—and yet is it not feasible?

Yes:—and she will attempt it without another instant's delay.

Seating herself at the table, she steadied her hand as well as she could to pen the following lines:—

"Whoever finds this, let him at once hasten to succour a persecuted girl who is held prisoner in the dwelling of Mrs. Brace, the dress-maker of Pall Mall. To a constable admission will not dare be refused; and let no excuse nor denial be received! The blessing of heaven will wait upon those who may rescue from dishonour the orphan

"ROSE FOSTER."

Having written this hasty billet, she folded it up and concealed it for the present in her bosom.

Her next proceedings were promptly undertaken and skilfully executed. With a piece of whalebone taken from a pair of stays, and by means of some twisted silk, she made a bow: then breaking off a thin rail from the back of a chair, she trimmed it with a knife until she reduced it to the degree of lightness fitting it to serve as an arrow. To the end of the stick she fastened her note; and opening the window gently, she shot the arrow completely over the roof of the adjacent house, so that she felt certain it must fall into St. James's Square.

Then, closing the window, she cut off the silk from the whalebone and burnt the thin shavings of the wood, so that not a trace of her proceeding remained visible inside the chamber.

Hope once more returned to the young maiden's bosom—for she looked upon the thought which had led to the step just adopted, as the inspiration of that heaven which had not deserted her.

And, Oh! in some minds—especially in those of youth—how elastic, how indestructible is hope! Sometimes, to be sure, it is but the last stand which the anguished soul makes against despair;—and not very far removed from this case was the position of Rose Foster now!

For had she not received sufficient proof of the unprincipled character of the heir-apparent and the extremes to which he was capable of venturing in order to gratify his passions or administer to his selfishness?—had not his heartlessness murdered her parents?—and was she not compelled to risk her own life in an appalling manner, to escape from his libidinous persecution?

All these reflections swept through the mind of the agitated girl, and nearly overwhelmed the hopes that had sprung up in her bosom; and as the moment approached at which his Royal Highness was to be there, a sense of colossal danger grew upon her with almost overwhelming effect.

At length she heard a stately step drawing near her chamber: the key turned in the lock—the door opened—and the Prince of Wales entered the room.

Closing the door behind him, he advanced with affable mien and extended hand towards the maiden, who stood motionless as a statue, and pale as the sculptured marble too,—but with her eyes fixed eagerly on his countenance as if to read her doom in his features!

Then, whether it were that she beheld some sinister light in his eyes—or whether some secret presentiment confirmed all her fears and utterly annihilated all her hopes, we know not: but certain it is that, suddenly starting into full and agonised life from that statue-like stillness, Rose Foster threw herself on her knees before the Prince—and, extending her clasped hands towards him, shrieked forth, "Mercy! mercy!"

"Silly maiden, of what are you afraid?" exclaimed his Royal Highness, hastening to raise her—or rather endeavouring to do so: but she resisted his attempt, withdrawing violently the hands which he had seized in his own. "Miss Foster—for I know who you are," continued George,—"I implore you to tranquillise yourself. Do not entertain so much mistrust concerning me!—do not look upon me with such cruel suspicion! Rise, I beseech you——"

"Does your Royal Highness swear that you come hither with friendly intentions only?" demanded the terrified girl—still remaining upon her knees, but averting herself almost shudderingly from the Prince.

ROSE FOSTER.

"I swear!" he exclaimed. "And now rise, Miss Foster—rise, and give me your attention and your patience."

"If your Royal Highness be truly sincere," said Rose, raising herself up, "you will at once lead the way to another apartment."

And, as she uttered these words, she moved towards the door.

"Stay, Miss Foster—and hear me," cried the Prince, interposing himself in such a manner that he effectually barred her passage from the room. "I must and will tell you all that I have to say——"

"Not here—not here!" ejaculated the maiden, her alarm rapidly heightening;—and, as she spoke, she endeavoured to glide past the Prince and gain the door.

But he seized her round the waist—and then a piercing shriek burst from her lips. A panic terror for an instant paralysed the royal voluptuary—and the orphan escaped from his arms before his lips had polluted her virgin cheeks with their hot and lustful kisses. Again she sprang towards the door: but the Prince, suddenly placing his back against it, exclaimed, "Miss Foster, I have said that you must and shall hear me—and, by heaven! I will keep my word!"

The unhappy girl, shrinking back in unspeakable terror, clasped her hands and fixed upon the heir-apparent a look so full of earnest entreaty and pathetic appealing, that had not his heart been made of the hardest granite those imploring eyes would have melted its callosity.

"Oh! will not your Royal Highness have pity upon me?" she exclaimed, once more falling upon her knees and addressing the unprincipled voluptuary in a rending tone. "My God! what have I done that your Royal Highness should become my bitterest enemy—my most relentless persecutor? All I ask is to be permitted to eat the bread of

mine own honest industry: but you—yes, you—the heir to the throne of these realms—are resolved upon reducing me to misery, ruin, and despair! And, oh! blame me not if your own conduct now wrings bitter and reproachful words from my lips:—but rather blame yourself for acting in a manner which compels me to remind your Royal Highness how cruelly—cruelly I have already suffered through you! Am I not an orphan—at the age of sixteen—deprived of those parents who loved me so well and whom I loved so tenderly in return;—and does not their death lie at your door? O God! when I think of all this, my brain reels—my blood boils—and I feel diabolical thoughts springing up in my mind—as if I craved for vengeance—I, who have never even trodden upon a worm, much less inflicted an injury upon a human being!"

And bending her head forward, the young maiden covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of tears.

The Prince stood irresolute: he knew not how to act. On the one hand he was maddened by the desire to possess that lovely girl who appeared to him even more charming than ever in the midst of the grief which convulsed her:—but on the other hand the reproaches to which she had just given utterance, raised something like a feeling of remorse in his soul.

Nearly a minute passed, during which his Royal Highness remained leaning against the door,—his eyes gloating upon the beauteous kneeling figure at his feet—and his compunctious feelings waging a severe struggle with his burning desires.

The violence of the orphan's grief having thus leisure to subside somewhat and the poignancy of her anguish to receive a slight mitigation, she withdrew her hands from her countenance—raised her eyes timidly—and was instantly struck by the expression of hesitation and uncertainty which was legibly depicted upon the features of her persecutor. A gleam of hope flashed to her soul; and starting to her feet once more, she hastily wiped away the tears—those drops of diamond dew that gave sweetness and softness to the light of the eyes on whose long lashes they hung!

"Your Royal Highness is touched by my appeal," she exclaimed, in a voice which was still broken by deep sobs, though during the intervals between those evidences of profoundly concentrated emotions it was tremulously clear and musically pathetic: "and you will not add to my afflictions by any outrage or wrong! Consider my position, great Prince—and have mercy upon me! An orphan and friendless, I have no protector—no vindicator! Bitter, bitter, is my lot in this world, heaven knows—and yet gall may be added to that bitterness, and my sorrows may be enhanced to despair. For, as there is a God above us, I vow that if disgrace, and shame, and ruin should overtake me, I will not survive that crowning misery—that consummating woe! No—never—never: but in a voluntary death—dark and terrible though the crime may be—will I end my wretched existence! Spare me, then—spare me, great Prince!—and let me depart hence in safety! Do this—and I will forgive you for the past—I will cease to look upon you as the cause of my parents' death! Oh! spare me—spare me!—on my knees again do I implore your Royal Highness to spare me!"

"Will you hear me for a single moment?" exclaimed the Prince, darting forward and sustaining her as she was about to sink into a suppliant posture once more: then, ere the shriek of terror which rose to her lips had time to burst forth, he quitted the slight hold that he had laid upon her and resumed his leaning attitude against the door. "Now you perceive," he said hastily, "that I am not unreasonable—that I can tutor myself to the exercise of forbearance—and that I deserve alike your attention and your patience."

"Speak, speak!" cried the trembling girl, casting down her eyes beneath the devouring looks of passion which he bent upon her. "What has your Royal Highness to say to me?—wherefore can you not be generous and grant my prayer at once?"

"Because I wish to make you a proposal, Rose," was the immediate response; "and I fervently hope—nay, I conjure you—that it may receive a calm and serious consideration."

"A proposal?" murmured the young orphan, with a cold shudder passing over her entire frame. "What proposal can the Prince of Wales have to make to an obscure, humble, and unhappy girl? Oh! none—none that is honourable and to which I ought to listen," she added, with wildness in her voice, her looks, and her manner.

"In the name of God, tranquillise yourself—it only for a few minutes!" exclaimed the Prince. "For it is precisely because you are obscure, humble, and unhappy that you should not turn a deaf ear to the words which I am about to utter. And start not when I declare that inasmuch as you are beautiful, and good, and virtuous, so do I love, and esteem, and admire you. But marriage is impossible—you know that I cannot address you with truthfulness and sincerity on that point; and the time for practising any duplicity or delusion towards you, is past! What, then, do I propose? That you should consent to be unto me as a wife, though without the name; and to you will I conduct myself as a tender and affectionate lover. Wealth, luxury, and profusion shall surround you: a splendid mansion shall be your residence—troops of menials shall attend upon you, ministering to your slightest wants—and when you roll through the park in your gorgeous equipage, who of all the beauties gathered there will be more envied, more admired, or more courted than the acknowledged mistress of the heir-apparent to the British throne?"

The Prince had been suffered to proceed uninterruptedly in his speech, because mingled shame and indignation had sealed the young virgin's lips,—shame at the thought that her character should be so lightly estimated as even to warrant the audacious proposal thus made to her—and indignation at the proposal itself! But as the Prince continued in the development of his plan, a faintness crept upon the maiden's heart—and anger gave way to terror, as the conviction was borne in unto her mind that the profligate persecutor was capable of any atrocity in order to obtain his ends. The colour came and went upon her cheeks a dozen times in a minute as these successive feelings and emotions agitated her bosom:—but when his Royal Highness beheld her pale countenance suddenly suffusing with a warm blush, he in his gross nature mistook the cause, and fancied that his proposal was received with an augmenting pleasure that had to struggle against virgin bashfulness.

Great was his surprise, therefore—ineffable was his amazement, when Rose Foster, suddenly inspired with the energy which is often furnished by despair, started from her trembling, timid attitude—drew herself up to the full of her graceful height—and extending her right arm towards him, exclaimed in a tone of command, "Silence—and pollute the air no longer with those words which are baleful as a pestilence!"

Oh! grand in thy virgin dignity—overpowering in thy maiden modesty wast thou at that moment, thou lovely and pure-minded orphan girl! The royal voluptuary—unable to believe the evidence of his own ears and eyes—was staggered by thy words and amazed by thy demeanour. And beautiful—Oh! incalculably beautiful was the effect of thy statuesque attitude and the noble expression of thy soft and touching features, at that moment animated with a sense of outrage and insult! Oh! deep, deep is the sympathy that we entertain for thee, thou virtuous and charming girl;—and sooner than the hand of the spoiler shall grasp thee rudely in the embrace of unhallowed lust—sooner than thy purity and thine innocence shall be sacrificed to the passions of thy persecutor—aye, and sooner than thou, with thine own consent, shall become the mistress of the royal profligate, we would see thee dead—laid in the cold grave—and we would ourselves exclaim, "Back, back to the realms of heaven, thou ray from Jehovah's brow!"

Yes—the Prince was indeed amazed and staggered by the words and the demeanour of the young orphan; and before he could recover from the state of feeling into which he was thus thrown, she addressed him with a solemn and touching earnestness which would have evoked a generous response from any other individual.

"No words, Prince of Wales," said Rose Foster, "can describe the indignation with which I reject—nay, scorn and recoil from, the proposal which you have dared to make me. The ladies of the Aristocracy may deem it an honour to become notorious as the Prince's favourite wantons: but the humble daughter of the People turns in loathing and wrath from the bare idea of such ignominy. Oh! well does the nation know that the higher the grade, the less virtue is to be found in it; and the despised, scorned, tyrant-ridden, and starving millions may take to themselves credit for virtues unknown amongst their titled oppressors. Go, Prince of Wales—go amongst your Duchesses, your Marchionesses, and your Countesses—and pay your court to *them*: you know full well that *they* will not refuse your love-suit, but will deem it an honour to surrender up all purity, innocence, and virtue at the shrine of Royalty. Yes—go to *them*: but dare not to breathe the same tale in *my* ears! The daughters of the People know that shame and infamy, however highly gilded, are shame and infamy still—and that the tarnish of a frail woman's reputation shows through the costliest veil with which the bounty and profusion of a royal lover may seek to conceal it! Now then, Prince of Wales, be generous—be great—be good—and allow me to depart in safety. I will thank you for this act of mercy, *if* you will concede it: for though I may more properly call it a deed of justice—yet will I speak of it and regard it in the light of a bounteous and humane concession from a mighty Prince towards an obscure and friendless orphan girl!"

"By heaven! I know not how to answer you—how to deal with you, singular and incomprehensible creature that you are!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, who could not help thinking that the maiden appeared ravishingly charming and profoundly interesting in the midst of her grief and tears, she was radiantly attractive and overpoweringly beautiful in the flush of her excitement and the goddess-like dignity of her attitude.

"In one word," she said, trembling inwardly through fear of a refusal, "I beseech your Royal Highness to suffer me to leave this room and this house—and everything that I have previously endured at your hands shall be forgotten."

"Oh! no—no," he exclaimed, his passion increasing him: "I cannot part with thee thus easily, thou adorable creature!"

And springing forward, he caught the young maiden in his arms.

A piercing scream burst from her lips—and she struggled desperately to tear herself from his embrace. But, excited almost to a delirious pitch by the fury of his desires, he seemed like a madman bent upon accomplishing his aim without the slightest regard for the consequences; and the wretched girl found her strength failing her and her senses ebbing away, as every moment saw her struggles becoming weaker and her cries more subdued,—while the triumph of the Prince appeared more and more certain.

But suddenly the door was burst violently open—and Tim Meagles, followed by Melmoth the working man, rushed into the chamber.

CHAPTER CXI.

THE FRIENDSHIP OF ROYALTY!

To dash forward—hurl aside the Prince of Wales—and catch Rose Foster in his arms,—all this was the work of a single instant with Meagles;—and when his Royal Highness, uttering a terrible imprecation, was about to spring upon his friend Tim and deal him a savage blow, Melmoth seized upon the heir-apparent without hesitation, pinioning him fast despite of the desperate struggles he made to extricate himself.

But scarcely was all this accomplished, and Rose had begun to murmur a few words of heartfelt thanks to her brave deliverer, when three men armed with staves entered the room, followed by Mrs. Brace's two footmen, the milliner herself, and Harriet the lady's-maid.

The fact was that Meagles and Melmoth the working man, having been out together the whole morning instituting inquiries concerning Rose were standing in St. James's Square deliberating what course they should pursue now, five days' research having already proved vain and fruitless—when they observed an arrow lying upon the pavement near the enclosure; and curiosity prompted them to pick it up, to their indescribable amazement they found the note which at once cleared up everything in respect to Miss Foster's hitherto unaccountable disappearance. But as Tim Meagles was well aware that Mrs. Brace's establishment was secretly patronized and protected by the Prince of Wales,—and moreover, as the law gave him no power to force his way into it without the coun-

nance of some legal proceedings or the presence of some legal functionaries,—he hastened to procure the assistance of three constables. These officers went with him and Melmoth to the house, which they all unceremoniously entered; and, in spite of the remonstrances, threats, and entreaties of Mrs. Brace, a search was commenced throughout the premises. In a short time the screams issuing from a particular chamber led the party in that direction:—but on Mrs. Brace's hurriedly whispering to Meagles that the Prince was with Miss Foster and that a scandal must be avoided, he had ordered the constables to remain on the landing of the staircase, while he and Melmoth prosecuted the search by themselves. However, the noise of the struggling between Melmoth and the Prince and the terrible imprecation to which the latter gave vent, made the officers fear that violence was being used: and in order to adopt the necessary precautions to preserve the peace as well as to take any offender into custody, they hurried to the scene of action, despite the endeavours of the two tall footmen to hold them back and the entreaties of Mrs. Brace that they would not push their interference any farther.

The constables, who of course belonged to the parish, instantly recognised the Prince of Wales;—and, their ideas of justice being as immediately absorbed in the notion that as Kings can do no wrong, so the heirs of Kings must be equally incapable of offending, they at once and without a moment's hesitation rushed to his rescue. Melmoth the working man was unceremoniously knocked down and laid senseless on the carpet by the heavy staves of the functionaries;—and these legalised ruffians, having thus disposed of one of the persons who dared seek their assistance in order to interfere with the pleasures of his Royal Highness, thought that they could not possibly be doing the Prince a greater service than by knocking down the other person in a similar style. Quick as lightning, therefore, were their bludgeons turned from Melmoth upon Meagles; and the brave defenders of poor Rose Foster were both stretched powerless at her feet.

So rapidly had this second act in the drama passed, that the heir-apparent had not the time, even if he had possessed the inclination, to interfere on behalf of Tim Meagles;—and it was with a species of consternation that he beheld the sudden diversion created in his favour by the decided though inconsiderate course adopted by the constables.

A strange scene of confusion now followed. Rose Foster had fainted when she beheld her champions so summarily and ferociously dealt with;—and she was borne away by Mrs. Brace and Harriet to another chamber. Restoratives were administered to Tim Meagles and the working man;—and while these individuals were being recovered, the Prince of Wales paced the room with rapid and uneven steps, deliberating how he should act in regard to them.

That an irreconcileable breach had now suddenly occurred between himself and Meagles, was evident: and he knew Tim quite well enough to be aware that he was capable of proving as dangerous an enemy as he had been a valuable friend. The present crisis was an alarming and a difficult one,—especially as it might lead to an exposure of everything connected with Rose Foster's deceased parents and the causes which had led to the father's suicide and the mother's sudden death. Moreover, the Prince saw that in many other respects he was deeply in the power of Meagles; and he perceived at a glance that his ex-friend would sooner or later stand in the light of an extortioner demanding immense recompenses for former services rendered. These rewards, titles, honours, places, and pensions would be wrested by menaces instead of besought as boons;—and thus, in every point of view, was it quite clear to the Prince of Wales that if he ever intended to make an attempt to crush Meagles altogether, now was the time!

Such were the reflections that passed, with rapid sweep, through the mind of the Prince of Wales during the couple of minutes that he paced with uneven and agitated steps the chamber where so many varied and stirring incidents had occurred. To a man so thoroughly heartless and capable of such black ingratitude as his Royal Highness, it was not very difficult to arrive at a decision.

But even while he was yet wavering how to act, the senior constable, who bore the euphonious name of Bax, accosted him with many low bows, and gave every possible intimation, short of the utterance of words, that he craved permission to speak.

"Well, now—what is it?" demanded the Prince, observing that the man was fidgetting round about him.

"Please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Bax, with another very low bow, "these fellers must be took into custody for assault and battery on your Royal Highness's person. One of 'em I don't know nothink of," he continued, pointing towards Meagles: "but t'other," he added, indicating the working man, "is a very notorious character."

"Who is he, then?" asked the Prince, impatiently

"His name's James Melmoth, may it please your Royal Highness," responded Bax; "and he's one of the most seditious scoundrels in all England. He speaks at public meetings—tells the working-classes they're oppressed—and denounces all Kings and Princes in a very savage style indeed, saving the presence of your Royal Highness."

"Ah! then the fellow must be crushed at once—or *he* will turn round upon me also," muttered the Prince to himself. "Damnation seize upon this dilemma into which I have worked myself! Yes—there is no alternative: the seditious villain must be crushed—or he will expose the entire affair at the very next public meeting he attends. But what do you purpose to do?" he demanded aloud, and looking Mr. Bax full in the face.

"I know my dooty as well as any man breathing—and so does my two partners here," replied the constable. "Why—what is the facts of the case? We happen to be passing by Mrs. Brace's establishment—and we see your Royal Highness standing inside the shop making a few purchases—when in come two ruffins, and without no manner of provocation they insults your Royal Highness—and well knowing who your Royal Highness was, they pitches into your Royal Highness—and your Royal Highness——"

"Good—good!" ejaculated the Prince. "I see that you understand how these little matters are managed. But are your companions to be equally well depended upon?"

"Quite, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Bax.

"Then let the two scoundrels be taken into cus

body and conveyed to the Home Office," said the Prince, at the same time slipping his purse into the constable's hand. "And mind, Mr. Bax—as I shall not be there to give evidence,—mind, I say," continued the heir-apparent, fixing a look full of meaning upon the functionary,—"mind that they are *both* seditious characters—both notorious rogues and disaffected persons — both dangerous to the State——"

"Ah! that they be," observed Bax, with a glance that showed how well he understood the part he was to play in the matter. "And now, as they are both rekivering, I should advise your Royal Highness to withdraw."

"Your counsel is excellent," said the Prince. "I cannot condescend to bandy words with such men, should they seek to address me and implore my pardon for *this unprovoked outrage which they have perpetrated upon me.*"

Having thus spoken — and in this last sentence conveying to Mr. Bax a hint relative to the language in which his evidence was to be couched at the Home Office—the Prince of Wales quitted the chamber just at the moment when Tim Meagles and James Melmoth were being restored to complete consciousness.

Having hastily reassured Mrs. Brace respecting any fears which she might entertain of exposure, scandal, and disgrace,—and having recommended her to keep Rose Foster a close prisoner for the present,—his Royal Highness hurried back to Carlton House, which was only a couple of minutes' walk from the milliner's abode.

Immediately on reaching his private apartment, he summoned Germain to his presence, and addressed that faithful servitor in the following manner:—

"You will proceed without an instant's delay to the lodgings of Mr. Meagles in Jermyn Street. I know that he is not at home at this moment—neither will he return for some time. But you will say that you are anxious to see him and will therefore wait for him. When alone in his apartments you will open his desk—closets—cupboards—trunks—everything where letters or papers are likely to be kept; and all such letters and papers which you can find, you will conceal about your person and bring to me. Never mind about breaking open locks—hesitate not to force doors or drawers, so long as you accomplish my commands. And if interrupted by anybody, declare boldly that Mr. Meagles is in a scrape—and that he requires his papers to help him out of it. If need be that you should say more than this, then state with equal effrontery that you are my servant and that it is by my orders you are thus acting on behalf of my valued and esteemed friend Mr. Meagles. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Germain;—and, with a low bow, he retired to execute the commission thus entrusted to him.

The motive of the Prince of Wales in directing this step to be taken, may be explained in a few words. It was not that he suspected for a moment that Meagles had purloined from him the papers proving his marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert, and the half of the Lightfoot certificate: but it was because he himself had on many occasions written notes to Meagles upon private affairs which he was loth to have published to the world; and he thought it probable that Tim might have preserved those letters, in which case it was only prudent to regain possession of them.

We shall now follow Germain and ascertain the result of his mission.

On arriving at Mrs. Piggleberry's house in Jermyn Street, the French valet was informed (as indeed he had been led to expect) that Mr. Meagles was not at home. He accordingly declared that he wished to see him very particularly and would walk in and await his return. The polite landlady, who knew that he was in the service of the Prince, showed him up-stairs to Meagles' sitting apartment, where she of course left him.

The instant that he was alone, Germain began to inspect the place; and a writing-desk on a side-table immediately attracted his notice. It was locked: but before he broke it open, Germain took the precaution of trying all the keys that were upon a bunch in his own pocket;—and one of them happened to fit the desk. A hasty glance over the papers which it contained, enabled him to separate the letters and correspondence from the useless documents, such as tradesmen's bills, sporting memoranda, betting-records, &c.; and having completed his research in respect to the desk, the valet proceeded to examine the cupboards and drawers in the adjoining bed-room. He however discovered no more papers;—and pocketting those which were set aside to be taken away, he descended the stairs—observed to Wasp whom he encountered in the hall that he could not wait any longer—and returned to Carlton House.

The packet of documents which he had thus stolen from Meagles' lodgings, was now delivered into the hands of the Prince of Wales, who was impelled by motives of curiosity to inspect them forthwith.

But how great was his surprise—how profound his amazement, when he discovered amongst them the very correspondence which he had missed from his own desk some weeks previously, and which contained the proofs of his marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert!

"Then Meagles really *was* a traitor and a scoundrel!" cried the Prince aloud, as he assured himself that the papers were indeed the originals and no forged imitations. "He must have stolen them, the villain—stolen them from me, his benefactor and patron! But he will be punished at length—that is, if I know anything at all of English Home Secretaries and of Home Office proceedings. Ah! ah! Master Meagles—caught at last, eh?" exclaimed the heartless heir-apparent with a triumphant laugh. "Much as the Ministers dislike me as an individual, they have a profound veneration for Royalty—and they will save this Royalty from being in any way damaged, even though I am its representative who must now be vindicated. Yes—yes: there is no fear but that Meagles and his companion Melmoth will get the worst of it at the Home Office."

And again the treacherous, ungrateful Prince chuckled joyously.

Then, resuming his examination of the papers, he discovered not only the half of the Lightfoot certificate which he had lost, but likewise the remaining moiety;—and here was another cause for wonderment and satisfaction.

But there was still a packet of papers to inspect;—and, to his increasing surprise, the heir-apparent found that they were all in the handwriting of Mrs. Fitzherbert! And—Ah! to whom were they ad-

dressed? To the Marquis de Bellois—a nobleman whom his Royal Highness knew to be at that moment in England, and whose name had been more than once mentioned to him by Tim Meagles.

Impelled by a devouring curiosity, and also animated by startling suspicions, the Prince addressed himself to the task of perusing the numerous letters contained in this last mentioned packet. But—Oh! why does his cheek blanch?—why does his lip quiver?—why does he become nervous and trembling, as if a strange excitement be growing upon him? Yes—and more acutely wrung are his feelings, now that the damning truth is carried to his soul,—the truth that Mrs. Fitzherbert was faithless to his bed and had been the paramour of another! And more—Oh! more still remains behind: but it is speedily revealed—speedily developed by means of those letters. For Mrs. Fitzherbert had become a mother during her foreign tour: yes—that woman whom he had married—his own wife—had borne a child to the Marquis of Bellois!

Dashing down the papers, the Prince of Wales started from his seat and began to pace the room in an agitated manner.

It was true that his connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert was now completely broken off,—true also that she had been ignominiously expelled as it were from Carlton House,—true that he sought not to exercise any further control over her. But he was wounded to the quick at the idea that he had so long been her dupe—that the late partner of his bed had played the harlot in a foreign clime and with a foreign noble—and that he had for years cherished the belief that, whether with him or absent from him, she had remained faithful to her love and her vows!

Then there sprang up in the heart of the Prince a bitter, burning hatred against the Marquis de Bellois, whom he looked upon as a successful rival—nay, whom he even regarded in the same light as a husband views the seducer of his wife. And upon this French refugee the Prince of Wales vowed to be avenged sooner or later, and by some means or another—he cared not how, but he hoped it would be soon!

The secret of Tim Meagles' success in compelling Mrs. Fitzherbert to leave Carlton House so abruptly, was now fully explained: it was evident to the Prince that he must have menaced that lady with exposure in respect to the amour whereof he possessed such damning proofs. Nor less did the possession of the Lightfoot certificate afford a complete clue to the tactics adopted by Meagles in negociating with the King respecting the peerage and pension which had since been conferred, according to promise, upon Mr. Clarendon.

"Thank God," exclaimed the Prince of Wales, as he secured all the documents in his desk,—"thank God that I thought of sending Germain to rifle my late friend's lodgings. The incident at Mrs. Bruce's this afternoon, although at first so menacing, has turned out entirely to my advantage, since it led to my becoming possessed of these most important papers. And another desirable result will be presently gained," he added, with a smile of haughty triumph: "for the villain Meagles is sure to be crushed beyond all possibility of redemption. Thank heaven, the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended just at this moment!"

CHAPTER CXII.

THE PROCEEDINGS AT THE HOME OFFICE.

Thus did the Prince of Wales congratulate himself upon the certainty of irretrievable ruin overtaking the man who, whatever fault he might have committed and whatever treachery he might have perpetrated in purloining papers from the heir-apparent's desk, had nevertheless served his Royal Highness with such fidelity and zeal on innumerable occasions as to deserve at least some degree of leniency at his hands.

But while the Prince was musing in that heartless style, an important investigation had already commenced at the Home Office.

In a lofty, spacious, and handsomely furnished apartment, three gentlemen were seated at a table. A clerk was employed in taking down the depositions at a desk near one of the windows;—and midway between the table and the desk Meagles and Melmoth were standing. Two of the constables guarded the door;—and Mr. Bax, the senior functionary, was under examination.

Of the three gentlemen at the table, the one who occupied the chair at the head was the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, his superior in that office being engaged elsewhere at a Cabinet Council. On the right hand sate the Attorney-General;—and on the left the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

The names and addresses of Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth had been duly taken down; and Mr. Bax was now giving his evidence—or rather *his* version of the affair involving the charge against the prisoners.

"Please, gentlemen," said the constable, "me and my two partners was walking along Pall Mall West quite promiscuously and saying nothin' to nobody, when we see a raythor stout gentleman in the shop of Mrs. Brace, the highly respectable milliner. Well——"

"Merciful heavens!" exclaimed Meagles, who as well as his co-accused had hitherto been held speechless with amazement at the tremendous falsehood of the constable's preface: "so far from the Prince being in the shop——"

"Silence, prisoner!" said the Under-Secretary, sternly: "you will have an opportunity of cross-examining the witness presently."

"Very good, sir," observed Meagles, bowing respectfully.

"Don't answer me, sir—I tell you!" vociferated the Under-Secretary, flying into a passion.

"Your conduct is anything but like that of an innocent man, Mr. Meagles," said the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street, coldly and sternly.

"The impression you have already made on my mind is most unfavourable to you," added the Attorney-General, with a look full of hatred and spite at both the prisoners.

"Gentlemen, I can assure you——" began Meagles, more surprised than indignant at the observations just made: for he was wondering in what manner he could have offended so grievously and likewise so prejudicially to his own interests.

"Silence, once for all!" ejaculated the Under-Secretary.

"Or we shall be compelled to have you removed and go on with the evidence in your absence," observed the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

Meagles bit his lip almost till it bled—for he could scarcely repress a violent outburst of indignation at the cowardly bullying to which he was being subjected;—while James Melmoth found it equally difficult to restrain the fury that was boiling within him, and the effort to subdue which rent his very heart-strings with an excruciating anguish.

"Go on, Bax, with your statement," said the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

"Well, gentlemen," resumed the witness, "I was informing your honours how me and my two partners was a-walking promiscuously along Pall Mall when we see a rayther stout gentleman in Mrs. Brace's shop. At first his back was towards the door; but presently he turned round, and then we twigged——"

"Recognised, my good friend," suggested the Attorney-General, administering a verbal corrective in a tone whose blandness contrasted remarkably with that which he had adopted when speaking to Meagles.

"Thank'ee, sir—I meant to say *recognised*," continued Bax.

"And whom did you recognise?" asked the Chief Magistrate, also speaking in a mild voice and with agreeable manner.

"His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales," returned the constable. "He was talking to Mrs. Brace, which is a very respectable lady as always pays her rates and taxes without a murmur and reg'larly illuminates her house on all Royal Birthdays."

"Ah! a truly loyal subject," observed the Under-Secretary, with an approving glance at the Attorney-General. "Please to continue your evidence, Mr. Bax."

"And let him remember he's on his oath!" exclaimed Melmoth sternly—for the working-man was unable to subdue his feelings any longer.

"Silence, fellow!" ejaculated the Under-Secretary.

"These constant interruptions are intolerable!" cried the Chief Magistrate.

"They show clearly enough that the prisoners are aware of the desperate condition in which they have placed themselves," said the Attorney-General. "But such infamous attempts to intimidate the witness——"

"The attempts are made to intimidate *us!*" exclaimed Melmoth, with an energetic gesticulation.

"How dare you threaten to strike the witness?" vociferated the Under-Secretary, starting from his seat.

"I did no such thing—I only waved my arm in the air," replied Melmoth, undaunted by the menacing mien assumed by the Under-Secretary. "But let the witness go on and finish his story."

"Proceed, Mr. Bax," said the Chief Magistrate.

"Well, your honours," resumed the constable, "as his Royal Highness was giving his orders to Mrs. Brace, the two prisoners come along the street arm-in-arm, and looking wery disorderly: me and my partners instantly twigged—I mean recognised them—and we at once knowed them to be two of the most desperate spouters at public meetings——"

"I never was at a public political meeting in my life!" ejaculated Meagles.

"Oh! very well—you've committed yourself now," said the Attorney-General, with a sardonic smile of triumph as he caught up the prisoner's remark. "You declare that you were never at a *public* political meeting; and the natural inference of course is that the meetings which you do attend are of a *private* character. Very good, Mr. Meagles: you stand confessed a member of Secret Societies. Take that down in the depositions, Mr. Prescott," added the Attorney-General, speaking to the clerk.

"By heavens! I will not submit to this diabolical misinterpretation!" ejaculated Meagles, his countenance becoming crimson with wrath, and every vein on his forehead swelling almost to bursting.

"It is scandalous—perfectly fiend-like!" exclaimed Melmoth. "No Russian tyranny or Spanish inquisitorial despotism was ever worse."

"Silence—both of you—or you shall be removed immediately!" cried the Under-Secretary, who had posted himself upon the rug in front of the fire.

Then Meagles threw a hasty look upon Melmoth, as much as to hint that they had better subdue their feelings as well as they could and let the witness proceed to the end; or else their removal from the room would deprive them of any little chance which they possessed of amending their own cause by shaking his testimony when the moment for cross-examining him should arrive. But that glance escaped not the lynx-eyed Attorney-General, who instantaneously rendered it available to his own purposes.

"Did you observe those looks of intelligence which passed between the prisoners?" he demanded, addressing himself to the Under-Secretary and the Chief Magistrate: and, as they both nodded their heads affirmatively, the great legal functionary continued to exclaim, "Every step that is taken in this investigation yields fresh proofs of the dangerous characters of these men. Not only do they belong to Secret Societies, *by their own unguarded admissions*—but they actually carry their presumption so far as to communicate with each other by means of secret signs in our presence!"

"'Tis false—false as hell!" ejaculated Melmoth, stamping his foot furiously upon the carpet.

"Do not let us be provoked into intemperate language, my good friend," said Meagles, earnestly. "I beseech you to be tranquil for the present."

Melmoth bit his lip and held his peace: but the agitated workings of his countenance plainly indicated how poignantly his soul was tortured by the effort which he was compelled to make to subdue a terrific explosion of those outraged feelings that sought a vent.

"Proceed, Mr. Bax," said the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street.

"I was observing, gentlemen," resumed the witness, "that while his Royal Highness was in Mrs. Brace's shop, a-talking to a young gal there——I mean to the milliner herself," he hastened to add,—"them two prisoners come along the street in a disorderly manner, and looking just as if they was anxious to get up a row and collect a mob. Me and my partners, knowing them to be seditious characters and evil-disposed persons, kept a eye upon them: and, lo and behold! they walks straight into Mrs. Brace's shop—begins pulling the bonnets, the gowns, and the gals about—and takes liberties with the lady herself. The Prince very nat'rally remonstrated with them; but scarcely had he begged them to take

theirselves off, when one gives him a poult in the eye, and t'other a dab on the cheek—and there's no doubt in the world that his Royal Highness would have been killed stone dead in less than a minute if me and my partners hadn't rushed in and scured the rioters. A more unperwoked outrage I never witnessed in all my life."

"And did the prisoners know that it was his Royal Highness whom they were thus atrociously, brutally, and barbarously attacking?" inquired the Attorney-General.

"To be sure they did!" ejaculated Mr. Bax. "For they told him that they should like to serve his d——d old father in the same way."

"Did they utter any treasonable language?" demanded the Attorney-General. "I mean, did they say anything which led you to believe that they aimed at the overthrow of the monarchical institutions of this country?"

"Oh! plenty of such sayings as them," returned Bax.

"I suppose that the prisoner Meagles alluded to Republicanism and French affairs?" said the Attorney-General, interrogatively.

"He talked about pitching the throne to the devil," responded Mr. Bax; "and he declared that the English people was fools not to imitate the French."

"And the prisoner Melmoth—did he give his assent to these observations?" asked the Attorney-General.

"Oh! he was quite as bad as t'other and said as how that all Kings was tyrants," replied the constable.

"That will do, Mr. Bax," said the great law officer. "You have given your evidence in a very straightforward, candid, and praiseworthy manner;—and if the prisoners will allow *me* to offer them a suggestion, I should advise that they do not aggravate their guilt by any useless bravado, such as cross-examining the witness—but that they at once throw themselves on the mercy of the Government."

"Mercy, indeed!" echoed Meagles, with a bitter tone and a disdainful manner. "No, sir—we are well aware that mercy exists not in the quarter where you would persuade us to look for it: but we will see whether there be anything like *justice* in this tribunal before which we now stand. I presume that the moment has now arrived for the cross-examination of this witness?"

"Yes—if you persist in a course so vitally prejudicial to your own interests," observed the Attorney-General.

Meagles condescended not to vouchsafe any reply to the remark: but, turning towards Mr. Bax, he said, "Upon your oath—your solemn oath—have you told the truth?"

"That question cannot be allowed," interposed the Attorney-General. "If Mr. Bax should admit that he has spoken falsely, he would be liable to a prosecution for perjury—and no witness can be allowed to criminate himself."

"Then I will ask him," exclaimed Meagles, "whether my fellow-prisoner and myself did not seek him at his own house and require his assistance to rescue a young lady——"

"I really cannot permit this line of cross-examination," cried the Attorney-General. "While pretending to ask a question, you are entering upon matter quite extraneous——"

"I will show you in a moment, sir," interrupted Meagles, "how the case of the young lady alluded to, is intimately associated with the causes of my arrest and that of my fellow-prisoner."

"No young lady has been specifically mentioned in the evidence," replied the Attorney-General doggedly; "and therefore I cannot permit you to conjure up the phantom of such a young lady to suit your own particular purposes."

"But it was in consequence of the vile persecution of this young lady by the Prince of Wales, exclaimed Meagles, "that——"

"No persecution was mentioned by the witness Bax," said the law-officer. "Keep to his evidence, sir—and cross-question him thereupon."

"I will ask him, then," resumed Meagles, beginning to be much perplexed by the nature of the proceedings,—"whether I did not in the first instance call upon him to accompany me to Mrs. Brace's house——"

"This certainly is most irrelevant!" interposed the Chief Magistrate.

"Most decidedly!" added the Under-Secretary. "It cannot be tolerated for a moment. It is against all rule——"

"And law," observed the Chief Magistrate.

"And precedent," exclaimed the Attorney-General.

"Then I had better hold my peace," cried Meagles, in a tone of extreme bitterness: "for I see plainly enough that you are bent upon accomplishing our ruin. Melmoth, my good friend," he added, turning towards the working man,—"I should advise you to abandon all hope of profiting by the cross-examination of that perjured scoundrel."

"Stand aside, Mr. Bax!" exclaimed the Attorney-General, unable to conceal his delight at having thus so easily got rid of any farther opposition to the witness. "Come—let your companions be sworn."

The other two constables accordingly stood forward; and each, in his turn, deposed to the truth of the statement already made by Mr. Bax, the Attorney-General putting to them such leading questions that they could not possibly mistake the answers which he was desirous of eliciting. Meagles and Melmoth both endeavoured to cross-examine them: but at every query they put, the Attorney-General objected. One question was "irregular;"—another was "irrelevant;"—a third was entirely in opposition to "all precedent;"—and a fourth came within the style of cross-examination which some very learned judge who lived a few centuries back, in a very barbarian age, had thought proper to disallow and prohibit. The result of all the objections thus raised by the Attorney-General, was that the witnesses were not permitted to respond to a single query calculated to shake their testimony or throw any real light upon the proceedings.

Mr. Prescott was now required to read over the depositions; which he did in a sing-song, parish-clerk kind of a tone—doubtless to the great edification of the Government officials, but to the unmitigated disgust of the prisoners, who had not as yet seen a glimpse of common sense or common justice throughout the entire proceeding.

The Attorney-General and the Chief Magistrate then drew up a report to the effect that, whereas certain evil-disposed, wicked, and seditious persons—to wit, Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth, not having the fear of God before their eyes, but

instigated by the Devil, had conspired, did conspire, and were found conspiring against the throne and kingly authority of these realms; and moreover did compass, imagine, conceive, intend, project, devise, purpose, and purport to depose his most Gracious Majesty from the style, title, and dignity of Sovereign of the British dominions; and whereas in order to accomplish, perform, and devise, and do what they had so wickedly compassed, imagined conceived, intended, projected, purposed, and purported, they did in the first place assume disorderly and seditious looks and evil-intentioned mien in the public streets, to the great dismay, consternation, and alarm of certain of his Majesty's loving and dutiful subjects, thereby endangering the peace of these realms, and the peace of these realms being so endangered; and whereas the said Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth, while thus wickedly and seditiously menacing the State with civil war, did raise their arms against the person of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, thereby committing certain wicked and seditious acts of assault and battery on the sacred person of the heir-apparent to the throne of these realms; and whereas it had been held that the raising of arms is the same as appearing in arms, and that therefore the said wicked and evil-disposed persons, Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth, were proven to have appeared in arms for certain treasonable and rebellious purposes against their Sovereign Lord the King; and whereas upon their own admission they did belong to certain secret, illegal, and unlawful societies, and that they had also communicated and conversed by means of certain secret signs in the presence of certain of his Majesty's civil authorities engaged in examining into all these and other sundry and divers charges; and whereas it was established by evidence that the said Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth were notoriously disaffected, seditious, wickedly disposed,

and riotous persons, not having the fear of God before their eyes, but instigated by the Devil; and whereas the political guarantees commonly known as the Habeas Corpus Act were at this time suspended in order that powers might be invested in the hands of his Majesty's Government to repress sedition and maintain peace and order within these realms; therefore the undersigned, his Majesty's Attorney-General and his Majesty's Chief Magistrate of the Police, did thereby recommend that the aforesaid Timothy Meagles and James Melmoth should be summarily dealt with as disorderly characters and evil-disposed persons, &c., &c.

This precious document having been duly drawn up and signed, was attested by the Under-Secretary and forthwith despatched to the Foreign Office where the Cabinet Council was sitting, in order that it might receive the signature of the Secretary of State. Extreme promptitude characterised the whole proceedings; and when the document was returned in the space of ten minutes with the name of the Home Minister attached to it, the Under-Secretary at once directed that Meagles and Melmoth should be deported from the country without delay.

Vainly did the prisoners remonstrate against this tyrannical conduct: vainly did they demand to be heard in explanation of the transaction which had led to their arrest;—and with equal fruitlessness did they request to be regularly committed for trial. Stern and inexorable negatives were the only response they could elicit: for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act gave the Government illimitable powers —and those powers were not likely to be used either leniently or humanely by the Ministers of that accursed tyrant George III.

It was scarcely dusk in the evening of this memorable day when Tim Meagles and James Melmoth were thrust handcuffed and carefully guarded into a post-chaise which received them at the door of the Home Office. The only indulgence they could obtain was a promise that on their arrival at Woolwich, which was the immediate place of their destination, they should be allowed to write a few lines to inform their relatives or friends "*that they had been detected in treasonable designs against the Sovereign, but that through the leniency of the paternal Government they were permitted to repair without delay to North America, on condition that they never again returned to their native land!*"

It would be difficult to describe the feelings of the two prisoners, as they found themselves being whirled rapidly along the road towards Woolwich,—with chains upon their hands and a couple of armed peace officers seated opposite to them in the vehicle.

Melmoth thought of his poor wife and children —and the cold shudder of despair passed through his entire frame every time he asked himself what was now to become of them? His wife loved him tenderly; and this sudden and unexpected separation might be the death of her, sickly as she was. At all events, even if she should survive the blow, she was already too weak in health and would become too deeply depressed in spirits to be enabled to toil for the maintenance of herself and children. Oh! these reflections were maddening—maddening; —and more than once the strong man groaned aloud, during the rapid and brief journey to Woolwich, as the whole current of his blood appeared to rush suddenly to his heart and brain under the influence of those harrowing thoughts!

And Meagles—how did he bear his misfortune? Somewhat more calmly and philosophically, because he had no wife and children upon whose heads this calamity would rebound. The feelings which animated his breast, were moreover of a bitter, burning hatred against the treacherous Prince, rather than of a softer nature such as a husband and a father would have experienced. Nevertheless, he sighed—profoundly sighed, as he thought of poor Rose Foster; and tears stole down his cheeks as he wondered what now would become of the friendless, persecuted orphan!

To both Meagles and Melmoth the whole adventure wore at times the aspect of a dream. Its suddenness—the hurry of the incidents through which they had passed—the extraordinary change that a few hours had effected in their circumstances—and the tremendous engine of despotism which in "merry England" had been set in motion to crush and annihilate them,—all seemed the details of a fantastic vision rather than the consecutive occurrences of stern reality.

At the Green Man at Blackheath the chaise halted for a few minutes: but the prisoners were not suffered to alight—nor did their custodians leave them. The postilion entered the tap belonging to the establishment, to procure some refreshment;—and from that place came the voices of revellers, singing in chorus over their ale. The song was one about "British freedom," and it contained a verse vowing devotion to "our good King George." Alas! those thoughtless beings paused not to reflect that British liberty was a mere idle phantom, cheating the eye and deluding the heart—and that their King was one of the most cold-blooded tyrants that ever the Almighty sent upon the earth to be a scourge and a curse to erring mortals!

On went the chaise again: and at length the lights of Woolwich gleamed in the distance. Another quarter of an hour, and the vehicle rolled into the town—proceeding straight to the dockyard. There it stopped;—the two prisoners were ordered to alight — and they were conducted into a little office, where, their manacles being removed, they were informed that they were at liberty to write the letters to their friends according to the promise made to them at the Home Office. It was however represented to them by the senior peace-officer to whose charge they had been entrusted, that the epistles must be couched in the sense already suggested, and that no comment upon the proceedings would be allowed. In a word, they were not to detail the facts according to the truth, but according to the version which had been recorded in the depositions: and the epistle which each prisoner wrote was therefore circumscribed to a few lines. That of Tim Meagles was addressed to Mrs. Piggleberry, who he was well aware would lose no time in communicating its contents to Lady Lade;—and that of James Melmoth was written to his poor wife.

When the letters were finished, the senior peace-officer took charge of them, with a promise that they should be delivered as early as possible in the morning;—and the two prisoners, having been remanacled, were consigned to the care of a corporal and four soldiers, by whom they were marched down to the wharf.

The evening was very dark: neither moon nor star shone upon the face of heaven—and the obscurity was only broken by the lights gleaming in

the windows of the arsenal and in the ships moored off the shore.

The soldiers conducted Meagles and the working man, both of whom were still handcuffed, down the slippery steps leading to the river; and at the bottom of the flight a boat was waiting, manned by six sailors under the command of a midshipman. The moment the soldiers and their two prisoners had entered the boat, it put off and rowed in the direction of a large ship which lay at a short distance, and through the port-holes of which lights were gleaming—so that it appeared as if a slightly curving row of lamps were suspended over the dark bosom of the river.

It was now by an effort of extraordinary skill, the most remarkable feature of which was the noiselessness wherewith it was accomplished, that James Melmoth succeeded in slipping off his manacles: but he held them in such a manner that their occasional clinking should prevent any suspicion of their removal.

In a few minutes the boat ran alongside the man-of-war which lay so still and stately upon the river; —and the two captives were ordered to ascend the accommodation-ladder to the deck.

Meagles went first: but scarcely had he mounted half-a-dozen steps, when a loud splash was heard, instantaneously followed by ejaculations of mingled terror and amazement from the soldiers and the sailors in the boat.

"Watch where he rises—and fire!" exclaimed the corporal.

"He has dived—underneath the ship itself, perhaps!" cried one of the private soldiers.

And then arose on board the man-of-war, echoing from stem to stern, the cry of "Some one overboard!" —and the ship, a moment before so silent, was now a scene of agitation and excitement throughout.

All this was the work of a few instants: but Meagles had immediately comprehended the startling truth, that his late companion in captivity had made a desperate effort and dared a tremendous risk in order to escape from his persecutors.

"God send him success!" muttered Tim, as a couple of sailors hurried him up the accommodation-ladder to the deck, where he was given in charge to the officer of marines.

Meantime all the boats were lowered—and lanterns were hung over the ship's sides; and the marines on deck were prepared to fire at Melmoth should he, upon re-appearing above the water, seem to have any chance of escaping from the galleys now rowing about in search of him. The tidings of his escape were communicated to the adjacent vessels and likewise to the shore;—and that portion of the river became completely illuminated with the lanterns hung out by the shipping and along the wharves.

But all these measures were vain and useless: James Melmoth re-appeared not to the view of those who were thus hunting him with blood-hound eagerness; and the impression soon became general that he must have perished in his desperate attempt.

Meagles shared in this belief—and great as his own afflictions were, he nevertheless had leisure and feeling enough to heave a sigh and drop a tear to the memory of the persecuted working man!

On the following morning, soon after sun-rise, the *Diana* frigate weighed anchor; and, her white canvass filling with a strong and favourable wind, she stood gallantly down the river—bearing away, within the prisonage of her wooden walls, the once dashing, rollicking, intrepid, and adventure-loving Tim Meagles!

CHAPTER CXIII.

THE ROYAL LOVER'S VICTIM.

We must now conduct our readers to an apartment in a little villa belonging to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and situated in the vicinity of Aylesbury.

This room to which we have just alluded was in a state of confusion; while some of its features indicated, alas! too plainly, the mental condition of that lovely creature who was its occupant! For there were bars to the windows and a strong iron grating over the fire-place: the door, which was chained outside, had a small trap to enable the physician, the nurse, or other attendants to satisfy themselves from time to time as to what the patient was doing within;—and all the furniture was so massive as to defy even the maniac strength which some sudden inclination for mischief might prompt to havoc and destructiveness. The chairs were however all scattered pell-mell about—some overturned —one piled upon another:—the carpet was rolled away from a portion of the floor;—the drawers were all open—and various articles of female apparel were lying here and there.

But who is she—that lovely young woman—with her attire hanging negligently about her and her hair in disorder? Upon her head she wears a crown cut out of paper—and in her hand she carries a sceptre formed of the same material! There is a mingling of melancholy and wildness in her looks—a glitter of restlessness combined with an expression of touching pathos, evincing the sad truth that the flame of intellect burns steadily no longer, although the warmth of feeling be still the same!

Oh! whither does her imagination wander, like a troubled dove unable to find its ark? Alas! alas! for that unhappy girl whose mind has become a chimera exercising the baleful influence of the Medusa-head to petrify all the wholesome thoughts that may chance to look in upon her soul!

For that same imagination which so lately proved the active element of her life's happiness and made her love the source of so many Eden-like joys,—which decked fancy's temples with the fairest and brightest flowers, and revelled in the wildest and most romantic castle-building upon the enchanted ground of a foreshadowed future,—this same imagination it is that now substitutes wretched phantoms for glowing poesy and the silliest dreams for the most exalted imagery! Yes—that etherial spirit which was wont to soar like the flight of eagles above the clouds and penetrate even unto the realms of God's own glory,—has now changed into the unwholesome vapour of a will-o'-the-wisp ignobly coursing along the surface of the quagmires of the world.

But, oh! what emotion of the hidden being brings that deep flush at one instant to her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom—and in another moment chases away the roseate glow and leaves her pale as a marble statue?

Now an indescribable dignity pervades that superb creature, as she seats herself upon a table, fancying it a throne—and places her feet upon a chair, believing

it a royal footstool! For some minutes she remains still and queen-like, as if gazing upon a troop of courtiers kneeling around her: the delusion fills her with happiness—a flood of joy pours in unto her soul—her eyes light up magnificently—her countenance glows with the lustre and the richness of animation—her neck arches grandly—and her bosom swells with sensations of gratified ambition and proud triumph.

Suddenly a thought appears to strike her. 'Tis a momentary gleam of reason that darts athwart her brain, as the flashing levin breaks on a night of gloom: and, oh! how instantaneously the brightness passes away from her features and the cloud comes and settles thereon! For that gleam of intelligence, vivid as it is evanescent, dissipates her joyous illusion in a moment: and although her ideas relapse into chaos and confusion, yet does some sad and mournful impression—some strange and lurking misgiving remain uppermost in her mind;—and, in obedience thereto, she slowly takes off her crown and examines it together with her sceptre. Intently—oh! how intently she gazes upon those objects: then her look becomes frightened, like that of an innocent maiden struck by a first suspicion of her lover's treachery;—now her gaze is rivetted upon the royal symbols again;—and then bewilderment, terror, and awe gradually arise and mingle in her regard—like the look which we can fancy Eve to have sent forth from the gates of her Eden into the dimness of that unknown world upon whose face she was doomed to enter!

"Oh! is this the crown which I once hoped to wear?—and is this the sceptre which I believed myself destined to wield?" exclaimed poor Octavia Clarendon, her lips at length expressing the cruel doubts which had sprung up in her soul. "No—no: it was to be a crown covered with jewels and glistening with gems—and a sceptre of gold that would not break so easily as this! But my beloved one will soon appear and bring me the crown and the sceptre which he promised. Oh! why does he not come immediately?—for I have already waited long and patiently for my Prince! Sometimes I think that I am a strange, wild, and fanciful girl—and all my ideas, though plain enough, nevertheless glitter in confusion like the spangles upon a robe that is shaken, or like the gleaming meteors in the north when the polar night puts forth its pomps and splendours. But, oh! this confusion is brilliantly beautiful—and amidst it all I behold my Prince clad in royal garments and extending his arms towards me! Nevertheless," she continued, with a reflective air and in a tone of deeper pathos, "they will not let me hasten forward to meet him. Oh! why is this?—wherefore are we separated? Let me fly to his arms—or my soul will become a fountain evermore to gush with bitter tears! I will make the very air burn with my passionate sighs, if they keep me any longer from my Prince!"

Suddenly her entire manner changed: the melting beauty of her eyes gave place to a wild and terrible lustre which shot forth like lightning-shafts;—her countenance became colourless, ghastly, and distorted with anguish;—and her bosom rose and fell with a violence and a rapidity evincing that a profound agitation raged within.

"Away, ye vile and despicable baubles!" she exclaimed, starting from her seat on the table, and dashing the paper crown and sceptre upon the floor: "ye are the emblems of that deceit, and cruelty, and treachery which made me what I am! Oh! thou demon-hearted Prince, hast thou no mercy—no compassion—no sympathy for thy wronged and ruined Octavia? Wherefore hast thou blighted all the hopes of my youth?—why hast thou carried desolation and woe into the sanctuary of that heart which was filled with love for thee? O God! do thy thunders sleep?—O heaven! hast thou no lightnings left? Give me the wand of an enchantress and I will bring an universal deluge on the earth, that *he* may be swept away from the theatre of his crimes—yes, even though myself and all the world suffer annihilation at the same moment! Or let the mountains fall upon the nations, and crush the entire human species back, back into its pristine elements—so that *he* may perish miserably, miserably! Would that my words were daggers or that my looks were arrows, that they might go forth and pierce him to the heart! Revenge—revenge! shall I not be blessed with a full, complete, and crowning revenge for all my wrongs? Oh! let me think only of revenge!—let it be my reverie by day and my dream by night! Yes—I will cherish thee, thou fiend-like idea, as I once cherished the love that hath turned to this implacable hatred:—I will cherish thee as I would nurture an innocent babe, were I a mother;—I will cherish thee—Oh! I will cherish thee as the religionist clings to his hope of salvation! Thou shalt wall me round and imprison me in one circle of sensations—thou shalt confine me to the narrow space of one idea even as the Roman vestal, when seduced from her duty by the blandishments of love, was enclosed in a tomb of massive masonry. And yet—oh! my God—could I hurt that man whom I have adored and worshipped?—could I without emotion behold him dying or dead at my feet? No—no—never!"

And as the wretched girl thus shrieked wildly forth, a strong shudder passed through her frame, and she fell on her knees—joining her hands and clasping them convulsively at the same time.

"O ruined, heart-riven creature that I am!" she said, in a low voice franght with a pathos ineffably touching and tenderly musical: "wherefore have my own feelings become scorpions to sting and scourges to lacerate my bruised and wounded soul? Will heaven send no anodyne to sooth and heal? Oh! yes—for heaven is kind, and merciful, and good, and blesses the parched flowers of the garden with its reviving dew! Hear, then, my prayer, O Providence!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes with a holy earnestness; "and give me hope—give me comfort—give me happiness! Alas, alas! no solace comes: my brain reels—I suffer excruciating agonies in the hell of mine own thoughts—ghastly forms rise up before me—hideous shapes surround me! Adieu, adieu to all refuge against myself: miserable, miserable girl that I am, the torrent of my ideas whirls me along in a flood of burning lava! Avaunt, ye harrowing recollections—begone, ye racking memories! Oh! that the past were a blank—that the present were unfelt, unknown—and that I might waken to the view of a smiling future's roseate dawn! But this may not be: I am lost—lost—beyond all redemption lost! Darkness closes in around me—a stupendous blackness, deeper than a funeral pall, is enveloping me. Earth and heaven are pass-

ing away—all is an abyss, into which I am precipitating! Powers of heaven! will ye not stay my headlong flight? Oh! mercy—mercy—mercy!"

And covering her face with her hands, Octavia became convulsed with grief.

The ravings of her tongue ceased: but her soul was agaitated like the ocean when the storm sweeps over it. Upon her knees did she still remain—strong spasms shooting through the limbs that were thus bent under her, and likewise through she arms which had been wont to clasp the neck of her royal seducer.

For some minutes did she thus endure the unspeakable anguish of thoughts, and fancies, and imaginings the nature of which no human conjecture can probe: but at length she slowly removed her hands from her countenance, and gradually raised herself up from her kneeling posture.

Then, sinking on a chair, she fell into a reverie so deep—so profound, that her physical as well as her moral nature was locked up in the thoughts which now absorbed her entire being. Motionless was she as the sculptured marble: not a finger moved—her bosom heaved not to the respiration—and her lips remained slightly apart as they were at the instant when this waking trance seized upon her. So passionless was the repose of her countenance—so fixed were the eyes—so still was every feature, that had it not been for the faint shade of the pink upon her cheeks, she would have cheated the gaze of a beholder into the belief that she was indeed a statue. From the depths of her soul, whatever thoughts were agitating there, not a ripple reached the marble surface of her features;—and if it were despair that thus retained her limbs and looks spell-bound, it must have been that blank numbness which freezes every sense with the ice-chill of its utter hopelessness.

Upwards of an hour had passed during which Octavia Clarendon's mind and conduct underwent the various changes which we have endeavoured to describe in this chapter; and the reader has observed that in one mood she fancied herself a Princess or a Queen—in another she saw the delusion of that belief: now she retained her love for her seducer whose speedy arrival she expected,—and then she gave way to sentiments of the most implacable hatred towards him;—now she laboured under a fearful excitement,—and then she fell into a reverie which held her motionless and still as death!

But during the hour which had thus passed away, the little trap or wicket in the door of the chamber had been gently lifted more than once; and an old woman, with a benevolent countenance had looked anxiously but cautiously into the apartment:—then, having satisfied herself that Octavia was inflicting no injury upon her own person, the female withdrew, closing the wicket as gently as she had opened it.

The unfortunate young lady had remained upwards of twenty minutes in that deep, deep reverie which we have described above, and which was the most melancholy of all the varied phases wherein her mental aberration showed itself;—twenty minutes of fathomless meditation, in which the soul and the body both looked inwardly and saw nothing outwardly!

It was about the expiration of this interval, that the wicket was raised noiselessly again—and first the countenance of the old woman appeared—and then a young and lovely face, but on every lineament of which was expressed the deepest grief.

It was Pauline who now beheld her sister for the first time since the terrible calamity had overtaken the victim of royal lust and perfidy!

The door was opened softly; and the younger Miss Clarendon entered the room alone, the door being immediately closed behind her.

Subduing by a tremendous effort the emotions which struggled to burst forth and which nearly choked her, Pauline laid her hand gently upon Octavia's shoulder. The unfortunate young lady awoke as it were with a sudden start from her profound reverie; and looking up into Pauline's countenance, she gazed long and intently on those features which she had kissed a thousand, thousand times, but which she remembered not now!

"Do you not recollect me, dearest—dearest Octavia?" asked Pauline, in a faint and scarcely audible tone: and she would have thrown herself upon her sister's neck and wept upon her bosom, had she not been emphatically enjoined to abstain from any demonstration of feeling calculated to excite the unfortunate girl.

"Yes—I recollect you," responded Octavia, after a long pause, during which she continued to gaze earnestly up into her sister's face: "you are a good genius who has often visited me in my dreams and kissed me when I was asleep. I am not afraid of you, as I am of other people who present themselves before me. You are the goddess of sweet flowers, and bright sunbeams, and everything joyous and glad; and I have already learnt to love you, though this is the first time that I have seen you save in the visions of the night. But Oh! wherefore do you weep, angel that you are?" cried Octavia, starting to her feet and pressing her sister's hand tenderly.

For the tears rained in torrents down Pauline's cheeks!

"Ah! now I perceive that it is not only mortals who weep," continued Octavia, in a tone of ineffable sadness, which made her sister's tears flow more thickly and fast: "but the good beings who live in heaven can likewise shed those pearly drops. But why do you weep now?—is it for me that you are mournful? Oh! weep on, then—weep on, sweet angel—for I am unhappy—very, very unhappy!"

And, as she spoke, she dropped in a listless manner the hand of her sister, who, now utterly unable to resist the strong current of her emotions, sank upon a chair convulsed with grief.

"This is indeed most singular!" said Octavia, in a musing tone, as her eyes were fixed compassionately upon her sister—that sister whom she did not recognise! "It was but last night I dreamt that you came to see me; and I fancied that you were seized with a sudden and violent sorrow. For methought that you sate down by my bed-side, and took my hand, and began to talk to me upon subjects to which I paid little heed at first but which gradually enticed my attention—and then enthralled it altogether. And it appeared to me that you told me many things which had happened when I was a little child and which I had since forgotten; and so pleasing, so touching, and so truthful was your language, that I imagined myself once more a child—chasing the butterfly through the green fields—with my straw hat hanging half off my head—and

my tiny feet scarcely pressing down the daisies and buttercups over which they glancingly sped. And then you spoke of home—yes, of home—a home that I once had—where kind faces smiled upon me, and kind hands pressed mine, and kind voices murmured God's blessing in my ear; and again were your words so truthful and so striking that I wept at those reminiscences which were thus conjured up. But I have no home now," added Octavia, heaving a profound sigh: "for this odious chamber cannot be called my home. No—no—'tis a prison—a vile prison! Behold the bars at the windows—the iron grating over that fire-place—the padlocks to hold that grating fast—the door of the room always kept locked——Yes, 'tis a prison—a vile prison——Merciful God! 'tis not the home of my childhood——Oh! no—no!"

And having thus become suddenly excited by the unhappy turn which the current of her thoughts took all in a moment, Octavia clasped her hands convulsively, while her countenance, a few moments before completely unruffled, showed by its workings how poignant were the spasms that rent her heart.

"Octavia—Octavia—dearest Octavia!" exclaimed Pauline, unable to restrain her feelings any longer—but clasping her sister to her bosom: "Oh! do you not recognise me?—do you not know me, my beloved Octavia?"

"Ah! what name is that which you have mentioned?" cried the unhappy lady, tearing herself from Pauline's embrace, and speaking in a quick, agitated manner. "Methinks that name is familiar to me——yes—I have heard it before——Oh! breathe it again; for it sounds softly and sweetly upon your lips!"

And the elder sister gazed with a winning tenderness, strangely and painfully commingled with vacancy, upon the countenance of the younger, whose heart was too full to allow her tongue to give utterance to a word.

"Oh! why will you not breathe that name once more?" asked the victim of royal treachery, her voice becoming more melting and touchingly plaintive than ever. "If I could do you a pleasure in so simple and easy a manner, I should not hesitate."

"Nor I—nor I, beloved Octavia!" exclaimed Pauline, almost suffocated with the sobs that rent her breast: "only it drives me mad——"

"Mad!" ejaculated the elder sister, catching up the word which Pauline so unwittingly and so unfortunately let fall: "mad!" repeated Octavia, again becoming fearfully excited: "Oh! all the world are mad save myself! Ha! ha! I laugh merrily—merrily when I think how absurd and ridiculous every living soul renders himself while endeavouring to look wise and sensible! There is an old gentleman with a white head who comes to see me sometimes:—and he puts the silliest questions—makes the most preposterous remarks—and surveys me with the most laughable affectation of sympathy and compassion. Then he fancies himself a doctor and feels my pulse;—and I humour him, poor old gentleman, as well as I can, because I know that he is mad and cannot be held responsible for his actions. At another time an old woman comes to see me; and she is mad also. But she does not know it—she does not even suspect it; and it is by endeavouring to appear sane that she renders herself ridiculous. Poor old thing! I have more than once laughed in her face—but I have been sorry for it afterwards. All sadness, except that which arises from sin, is sacred;—and therefore when I behold the melancholy looks of that gentleman who believes himself a doctor and of this woman who fancies herself a nurse, I ought to be serious. It is wrong of me to laugh: but I cannot always help it. And now, my dear friend—for I do not know your name," continued Octavia, approaching close up to Pauline and gazing upon her countenance with an expression of melancholy interest, though still commingled with that vacancy which denoted reason's aberration,—"and now, my dear friend," she said, sinking her voice to a low and mysterious whisper,—"pardon me if I tell you a truth that may not be altogether welcome—but believe me, my dear friend, when I assure you that you yourself are as mad as any person in the whole world!"

Thus speaking, Octavia turned lightly away; and picking up her paper crown, she proceeded to put it straight—singing the while a plaintive air in a low tone and musing manner.

Several minutes elapsed, during which the unhappy young lady appeared to forget that any one was present in the room: but all this time her sister, with feelings stretched to almost the extreme power of their tension, was standing by and contemplating her.

Presently the door opened gently—and the Duchess of Devonshire made her appearance.

Then Octavia, placing the crown upon her head and grasping the paper sceptre, seated herself on the table once more; and, after surveying her sister and the Duchess with mingled dignity and sternness for nearly a minute, she commanded them to quit her presence.

Pauline would have lingered to converse with Octavia again—to weep over her—to embrace her—and to endeavour to resuscitate fond memories in her mind: but Georgiana, well knowing how terrific were the paroxysms of excitement which seized upon the unfortunate young lady when contradicted or thwarted, dragged rather than led the distressed and weeping Pauline away from the apartment.

And Octavia was left to that solitude which her disordered imagination filled with a thousand phantasms: but though alone in that chamber, she was not friendless nor deserted in the villa—for *there* had Pauline now taken up her abode, by the consent of the really kind and generous-hearted Duchess of Devonshire.

CHAPTER CXIV.

A HUSBAND'S SELF-MARTYRDOM.

FOUR or five days had elapsed since that tremendous scene at the mansion of the Earl of Desborough, which revealed to this nobleman and his wife the astounding fact that the criminal Ramsey was their guest,—a scene which led to the prompt departure of that treacherous individual, and threw the Countess upon a sick bed.

During that interval the Earl had been unremitting in his attentions to Eleanor: hour after hour did he pass by her bed-side—and it was his hand that smoothed her pillow, administered her medicine, and bathed her feverish, throbbing brows.

At first her senses wandered and delirium seized upon her;—and on those occasions the Earl was

careful to exclude the attendants from the room—for he naturally feared lest she should make revelations of a character destructive alike to *his* reputation and *her own*.

But it was not merely to keep a constant watch over her, that the Earl passed long days and held his vigils by the bed-side of the Countess: no—his motives were less selfish and far more estimable;—for he loved that woman who had deceived him—he loved, adored, worshipped her!

And as he gradually beheld the danger passing away—convalescence approaching—and her thoughts settling down into their proper channels, his heart rejoiced and he experienced a happiness greater than any he had long known: for as he contemplated that countenance so eminently handsome, and swept with his looks that form so exquisitely symmetrical as it lay stretched on the couch, the snowy bed-clothes affording indications of the contours of the shape and marking the superb length of limb and all the flowing outlines,—as he thus contemplated the lovely Eleanor, we say, he felt that it would indeed be hard for her to die in the vigour of her years and the meridian of her heart's glowing passions!

Thus was it that this good nobleman who lived only for the sake of that woman whom he adored, and whose happiness he would have gladly consummated by the sacrifice of his own,—thus was it that he watched day and night by her bed-side;—and after her senses had returned, whenever she opened her eyes they encountered the melting, tender, and affectionate looks of that husband whom she had wronged so foully!

But so soon as Eleanor was enabled to collect her thoughts sufficiently to ponder upon everything which had occurred on that memorable day when the thunderbolt fell and burst at her feet,—she began to ask herself over and over again whether she had betrayed the *one* dread secret to her husband. In fact, was he aware that Ramsey had been her paramour?—had she betrayed herself in the ineffable anguish of that moment when the canvass revealed to her the countenance of the criminal?—or did the Earl imagine *then* and *still* believe that her emotions at the time and her subsequent illness were merely the results of a sudden shock very naturally experienced under such painful circumstances?

The longer the Countess reflected upon these matters, the more did she endeavour to persuade herself that her adultery was unsuspected by her husband. But in spite of the assiduousness and the pertinacity with which she endeavoured to reason her mind into this belief, there was a constant terror—an incessant misgiving lurking at the bottom of her soul,—a feeling of uneasiness which she vainly, vainly sought to smother!

When she looked furtively at her husband at moments when he either fancied she was sleeping or when he himself had fallen into a reverie, the suspicion that she read the *worst* in his melancholy pensive features would amount almost to a conviction in her mind: and then she thought she could understand all the forgiving generosity of his behaviour—all the noble-hearted devotion which made him endure everything for *her* sake!

But when they were alone together, a nervous trembling would come over her as she lay on the bed of sickness—and at the first word which on those occasions fell from his lips, she would start convulsively as if some tremendous accusation were about to be made against her. At the same time the colour would come and go upon her cheeks with strange rapidity;—and while at one moment her veins would appear to run with lightning, at another the blood would seem to freeze in its crimson channels.

The Earl soon saw what was passing in her mind;—and, animated by that compassion and that love which influenced all his conduct towards her, he was resolved to put a speedy end to a state of suspense, misgiving, and alarm, so torturing to her whom he adored despite of all she had done outrageous to his dignity as a husband and his feelings as a man.

It was on the fifth morning after the terrific explosion effected by the exhibition of George Woodfall's picture,—and at about the hour of noon, that the Countess of Desborough was permitted by her physicians to rise from her couch for a little while.

Attired in an elegant *deshabillée*, the beauteous patrician lady was now reclining in an arm-chair placed at a short distance from the cheerful fire in her bed-room;—and when the Earl was re-admitted to the chamber and the attendants had withdrawn, he availed himself of this opportunity to make revelations which were perhaps less anticipated by his wife than they are by any one of the two hundred thousand readers of this narrative.

"My dearest Eleanor," he said, "the moment has now arrived when it becomes necessary that we should have some serious conversation together."

"Ah! the dreaded moment!" murmured the Countess in a hurried and agitated under-tone—bounding at the same time upon her chair as if she were suddenly galvanized.

"Do not be alarmed, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor," said the Earl, noticing the convulsive movement, but not hearing the half-agonised, half-despairing expression. "Let me at once and without circumlocution inform you," he added hastily, "that I know everything and that I pardon you!"

"Everything!" murmured the Countess, in a faint and almost dying tone, while her heart experienced such a sinking that it seemed as if the very tide of life itself were rapidly ebbing away.

"Yes — everything!" exclaimed the nobleman. "And now, my dearest—dearest Eleanor—if you will permit me thus to address you——I implore you to be calm and tranquil: for I solemnly and sacredly assure you that my forgiveness is as complete as your error has been great——"

"Oh! yes — great — great indeed!" cried the Countess, bursting into tears; "great—and unpardonable!"

"No — not unpardonable," responded the Earl immediately. "Immense allowances are to be made for you, Eleanor—and I believe—I hope I am too just not to admit the full scope of the extenuation!"

"You cover me with shame and confusion—you make me loathe myself!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, burning blushes now spreading over the cheeks which illness had left so pale. "Oh! you are an example of everything noble-minded, generous, lofty, and good—whereas I am the piteous representative of gross unhallowed passions and of that foul crime against which the Almighty has levelled a special injunction! Yes — yes—for I am an adulteress, Francis—and yet you can pardon me!"

With these words the Countess threw herself at her husband's feet—clasped his knees—and looking up towards him in an appealing manner, she seemed to wait in torturing suspense until another word

from his lips should confirm the forgiveness he had already promised.

"Rise, my Eleanor—rise!" exclaimed the Earl, hastening to lift her from her suppliant posture, and gently compelling her to resume her seat in the arm-chair: then, stooping towards her, he pressed his lips for a moment to her polished brow, murmuring, "Yes, my Eleanor—I do indeed forgive thee! By that kiss I swear that thou art pardoned!"

"Oh! never did so worthless a woman possess so noble-minded a husband!" exclaimed the Countess devoured by shame, remorse, and an ineffable sense of self-loathing.

"Reproach not yourself, my Eleanor," said the Earl: "but listen to all that I am about to tell you—and then perhaps," he continued in a trembling tone, "you will think me worthy of some little amount of love—unless indeed," he added, his voice becoming scarcely audible, "you should despise me altogether."

"No — no — impossible, Francis!" cried the Countess of Desborough. "But, Oh! do you not recollect that scene which occurred between us some few weeks ago — when you explained to me the hopes which animated you and the intentions that you cherished towards me on making me your wife——"

"Yes—yes—I recollect!" interrupted the nobleman. "Oh! not a word that ever passed between you and me, Eleanor, has been forgotten. On that occasion to which you allude I told you that my hope was to gain your esteem and friendship, and my determination was to surround you with the most delicate attentions and unwearied assiduities——"

"And on that same occasion, Francis," cried the Countess, "I acknowledged all that was great, generous, and noble in your conduct—and I assured you solemnly," she added, casting down her eyes and blushing deeply,—"I assured you that I was *then* as pure and chaste a virgin as the infant babe! Yes—despite of the impassioned ardour of my nature—despite of those fervent longings which at times almost maddened me—I was still innocent *in* body, although perhaps impure in mind and in thoughts. And, Oh! if since that period I have succumbed to temptation — opportunity—the irresistible force of circumstances,—if I have yielded to all these, and have lost my honour as well as *your* confidence and *my own* self-respect—Oh! have pity upon me—have mercy, Francis—for I had struggled long and powerfully—heaven knows how desperate were the efforts which for years I had made to repel temptation and guard mine innocence——"

"I *have* pitied you, my Eleanor," exclaimed the Earl,—"and I *have* pardoned you! Merciful God! all that has happened I have well deserved and should have foreseen! 'Twas I who deserve to be blamed—not you! With the lamentable physical misfortune which rendered me unfit for marriage—well knowing, in fact, that ten thousand sources of misery would eventually be summed up in the terrible word *impotency*—I was a wretch to have induced a young, handsome, and impassioned woman to accompany me to the altar! Oh! as I have before explained the infernal mockery, 'twas binding to the side of a corpse a being in whose veins coursed the rich warm blood of a vigorous youth! But, O Eleanor—Eleanor! I have been tremendously punished—and I have likewise endeavoured to make you an atonement, even though *your* dishonour and *my* infamy were involved therein! Now do you begin to understand any portion of my recent conduct——"

"Yes—yes—oh! yes!" ejaculated the Countess, a light suddenly breaking in upon her brain. "That night which the Prince of Wales passed in this house——"

"Oh! will you not despise me, Eleanor, I again ask?" cried the Earl of Desborough, his tone, his looks, and his manner indicating how deep was the excitement which was growing upon him. "But you shall first hear me—and then answer deliberately," he continued, without affording his wife time to respond to the query just put. "You remember that morning when the Duchess of Devonshire called upon you after her return from Scotland——"

"Great heaven! a thought strikes me," interrupted the Countess, an awful trembling seizing upon her entire frame and making every limb quiver as if with an intense chill. "Yes — that conversation which passed between the Duchess and myself——"

"I overheard it all!" said the nobleman, in a hoarse thick tone.

"And you did not curse me?—you did not invoke heaven's vengeance upon my head!" shrieked forth the wretched Eleanor. "O God! how deeply —deeply I have wronged you, Francis, in so many, many different ways: and yet you have not spurned me from you—you have not thrust me forth as you would the snake which having been warmed at your hearth, uprears its head to sting you!"

"Have I not told you that I love you—that I adore you, Eleanor?" exclaimed the Earl: "and are you not aware that there is no sacrifice which I am unprepared to make in order to ensure your happiness and win some slight portion of your esteem. But let us continue the topic upon which we were entering. You remember, then, all the particulars of that interview, Eleanor, which took place between yourself and the Duchess?"

"To my shame—to my confusion—to my deep, deep sorrow, do I recollect every detail!" said the unhappy patrician lady. "Led on by I know not what fatal current of reflections—impelled by some demon to open my heart upon a subject which should have remained sacred—I revealed the secret to her Grace of Devonshire——"

"Torture not yourself with poignant reproaches on that head," interrupted the Earl, with the mournful calmness of a martyr: "the past cannot be recalled—and it is useless even to deplore it. But on that occasion when yourself and the Duchess of Devonshire were indulging in the mutual outpourings of a secret confidence, the name of the Prince of Wales was mentioned by you both."

"Yes—oh! yes—I remember!" ejaculated the Countess, a new subject for shame now presenting itself to her mind, as the conversation alluded to by her husband flashed vividly to her recollection. "Oh! how can I bear thus to remain in your presence and have all my frailties and failings—my errors and my misdeeds, marshalled in dread array before my eyes!"

"It is not to torture you, Eleanor, that I am prolonging this discourse," said the Earl; "but in order that we may have certain necessary explanations, and that *my* conduct may be appreciated by

you in the proper light. Well, then—to resume the topic, painful though it be—I must remind you that the Duchess of Devonshire revealed to your ears the details of her own seduction by the Prince; and from *your* lips then came the avowal that his Royal Highness had bestowed his smiles upon yourself and had sought to make *you* his victim. After the departure of the Duchess, you came into the adjoining room, where you found me. As you are already aware, I had overheard everything. Oh! the mortal agony of that hour!—ages and ages of bitterness, and woe, and intense suffering were concentrated therein! For you had revealed to the ears of your friend *my* disgrace and *your* misfortune;—and so deep—so crushing—so overwhelming was the humiliation I experienced, that I stretched out my arms to the walls to give way and cover me with their ruins! You may conceive, then, how difficult it was for me to subdue my emotions and assume a tranquil mien when you entered the apartment. No angry feeling did I entertain towards yourself, Eleanor—but the harrowing sense of mortal agony which I endured, arose from the one grand, eternal conviction that I had done you a foul—nay, the foulest wrong, by becoming your husband."

"And yet, Francis," said the Countess, in a faint and trembling tone, "had you killed me when I thus appeared before you, after all you had overheard, I should have merited my fate."

"Holy God—no!" ejaculated the Earl. "Not for worlds would I harm a single hair of your head! But let me continue, Eleanor," he said, in a less excited voice. "During the night which followed that terrible afternoon I never slept a wink. Like another Cain, did I wander to and fro—cursing my own fate—wishing that I was dead—and yet recoiling from the idea of suicide. I reflected upon the wrong I had done you, Eleanor—and I reflected also upon the means of repairing it. By the confession which you had made to the Duchess of Devonshire, I

knew that you were pure and innocent—and I knew also that you were unhappy! Nature had endowed you with strong passions; and it was natural, therefore, that you should seek to appease them. They were devouring you;—and your sense of rectitude was put to a trial as unjust as it was intolerable. My God! how I pitied *you*—how I hated *myself! Yours* was a fate beyond all commiseration—mine an iniquity beyond all cursing! I vowed that something should be done: either I would lay violent hands upon myself and thus leave you free to marry another in due time—or I would actually seal my own dishonour by throwing a lover—a seducer—a paramour in your way! Yes—these were the alternatives between which I had to choose!"

"Oh! it covers me with shame—it weighs me down with confusion, to hear you thus unveil your feelings concerning me!" said Eleanor, bending down her head to conceal the blushes that suffused her cheeks—those blushes that overspread even her neck and her bosom!

"Heaven alone knows what a night of torture and misery I passed!" continued the nobleman. "Daylight brought me no relief—and I went forth to wander in the parks in a state of mind enviable only by a wretch about to be hanged. The mendicants who passed me and on whom I bestowed my alms, little thought how cheerfully I would have exchanged conditions with them! In the afternoon I called upon a medical practitioner—a Mr. Thurston residing in May Fair. I promised him largely—but he could give me no hope. I went away distracted. On my return home again, I resolved upon self-destruction. But better feelings sprang up in my mind at the very instant when I was about to place the muzzle of a pistol in my mouth. Then I determined to live—but to adopt that *other* alternative——"

"Oh! this is painful—most painful!" murmured Eleanor, with a faint hysterical shriek: "it is agonising—excruciating!"

"And yet you must hear me to the end," said the Earl, rather in a tone of entreaty than of command. "Well—I resolved, as I observed, upon that *other* alternative whereof I have already spoken;—and remembering that the Prince of Wales had already sought to make you his victim—as you expressed yourself to the Duchess of Devonshire—I determined to afford him the opportunity which he desired. With a suitable excuse I waited upon him;—and his Royal Highness *condescended*," said the Earl bitterly, "to accept a loan of twenty thousand pounds from the man whose wife he sought to seduce. It was to receive this sum that he honoured us with his presence in the evening;—and I was charmed to see that *you* were ravishingly beautiful and that *he* was dazzled and captivated. Yes—I was charmed, I say; inasmuch as the success of my stratagem appeared inevitable! His Royal Highness was easily induced to pass the night at the mansion;—and I felt confident that he would not fail to profit by the incident. You remember that in the drawing-room a dispute arose respecting some particular quotation. I volunteered to fetch the book which would set the question at rest. On my return to the apartment, I saw at a glance that a complete understanding was established between yourself and the Prince: or at least, I fancied that such was the case. You retired—and I was left alone once more with his Royal Highness. Then—Oh! then—a mortal sickness came over me—and I shrank aghast from the thought of my own self-martyrdom! The Prince observed the change which had come over me: but I easily persuaded him that it was a sudden indisposition. A few minutes elapsed in conversation—and we separated. He retired to the apartment prepared for him; and I hastened to my own chamber. Great heavens! what a night did I pass again! I felt that I had crucified myself—that I had planted a crown of thorns upon my own brows—that I had affixed the stigmata upon my own person: lava boiled in my veins—hell raged in my soul—demons scourged my writhing spirit with whips of scorpions and of flame! And yet, as God is my witness, Eleanor—I swear most solemnly that never once—no—not once did a feeling of anger arise in my breast against thee. Though confident that thou wast locked in the arms of a lover——"

"You wrong me, Francis!" ejaculated the Countess, solemnly. "I swear as solemnly as thou hast sworn, that the Prince——"

"I know what you would say, Eleanor—dear Eleanor," interrupted the Earl: "you surrendered not yourself to the arms of the Prince. Oh! this I saw on the following morning—this I understood beyond all possibility of doubt when his Royal Highness came forth from his chamber! And I, who was sinking down into the very dust with humiliation—I, the husband, who had sought to pander to my own dishonour—I who had tutored myself to make every sacrifice of feeling for thy sake,—I perceived at a glance that instead of a night of love and pleasure, the Prince had experienced a bitter mortification and a cruel disappointment. Then—oh! then, an indescribable pleasure seized upon me—and hurrying to my own chamber to conceal my joy, I wept like a child!"

"Merciful heavens! Francis—how acutely have you suffered for the sake of a worthless woman!" exclaimed Eleanor, throwing herself into her husband's arms and lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses. "Oh! how sublime has been your self-devotion—how glorious your self-martyrdom! Every mortal idea of generosity is outdone by this conduct of thine;—and I shall know how to thank thee, my good, kind husband—aye, and likewise to demonstrate a lasting gratitude towards you! Unless, indeed," she cried with hysterical abruptness, as a sudden thought struck her;—and at the same time she snatched herself away from his embrace,—"unless indeed, you loathe—detest—and abhor me, because I saved my honour from a Prince only to surrender it unto a criminal whose image is now as dreadful to contemplate as his presence was once necessary to my happiness!"

And, falling back into her arm-chair, the Countess fixed her frightened—anxious—deprecating looks upon the countenance of her husband.

"Have I not already declared that it is I who must ask your pardon over and over again?" cried the Earl. "But I shall not seek your forgiveness for what may not be forgiven: no—I will endeavour to prove still farther how anxious—how willing I am to make every reparation for the wrong I have done you, Eleanor, by becoming your husband. Listen, then—grant me your patience once more. What I propose is that you should institute a suit against me for cruelty—ill-treatment—and a continued series of cowardly and brutal acts towards you."

"Heavens! what mean you?" demanded the Countess, all the timid entreaty of her manner changing into ineffable amazement.

"I mean that you shall obtain a decree of divorce in the Ecclesiastical Court," responded the Earl of Desborough; "and the more important decree of separation will naturally follow in the House of Lords. To none of the legal steps thus taken shall I offer any opposition. Although the judicial proceedings will brand me as a cowardly ruffian who dared to ill-treat an amiable, excellent, and beautiful woman—yet shall I secretly rejoice at being thus placed under society's ban, inasmuch as my self-martyrdom will constitute *your* release from those matrimonial bonds that link you to the side of a corpse! You will be free to marry again——"

"Never!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, once more starting to her feet—and now drawing her fine form as proudly up as if she had not just risen from a sick bed: "never!" she repeated, in a voice which went thrillingly, though musically sweet and clear, to the very soul of her husband. "No, Francis—I am not base enough to avail myself of so much generosity: nor could I consent to the consummation of the tremendous wrong which would result towards yourself. What! consent to have *you* branded as a coward that could ill-treat a woman,—*you* who would sooner die than lift your hand against me—*you* who have never even uttered a harsh word in my hearing—*you* who have sought to make every sacrifice that an unheard-of generosity could possibly prompt! Listen to me, Francis—listen to me," said Eleanor, her voice becoming thick with emotion and her manner growing as decided as that of a heroine of masculine mind,—"I am not altogether insensible to the same feelings which have hitherto governed you only—and henceforth I will endeavour to share them with you. Not that I can ever hope to outvie you in generosity, Francis—because that is impossible: but I may at least render myself more worthy of all your love than I have previously been. Again, then, do I beseech you to listen—to hear me, while I invoke heaven to witness that from this moment forth I will be a good, obedient, dutiful, and loving wife—yes, a loving wife, Francis—and loving, too, with an affection which will burn all the more purely, and brightly, and warmly, because it is kindled by a spark caught from the flame that animates your noble heart!"

"Is this possible, Eleanor—oh! is this possible?" murmured the Earl, faultering in speech and staggering in limbs beneath the sudden weight of an overwhelming happiness. "Ah! wherefore afford me a glimpse of so joyous a paradise, only to make me recoil the more despairingly into a deeper and blacker abyss of despair?"

"Oh! he will not believe me—he has lost all confidence in me!" exclaimed the Countess, joining her hands with an air of poignant wretchedness.

"Believe you!" ejaculated the Earl: "yes—oh, yes—I will believe you——Only, this sudden happiness is too much——"

And, pressing his hand to his brow, he staggered forward—reeled half round—and sank nearly senseless upon a chair.

But ere he fell completely on the carpet, he was caught in the arms of his wife; and the unmistakable fervour with which she bestowed upon him the softest and tenderest caresses, carried to his soul the ecstatic conviction that his own devoted love had indeed engendered a reciprocal sentiment at last in the bosom of the woman whom he adored.

In fact, no words can express the astonishing revolution which a short half-hour had wrought in the feelings of the beauteous Countess towards her husband. His noble self-martyrdom for her sake,—a self-martyrdom involving all the most delicate emotions and the loftiest sentiments that ever concrete in the heart of man,—had inspired her with an admiration of his truly chivalrous character, which amounted to a burning enthusiasm. Instead of appearing contemptible any longer in her eyes, he shone with a god-like lustre to her imagination: instead of seeming an object to be despised and contemned, he had suddenly become invested with every attribute to command respect and ensure an exalted worship.

Chastened, purified, and elevated in every sense by the splendid example of a man who could make the largest sacrifices to the love which he cherished, and who would even have sealed his own dire unhappiness and stamped his own indelible dishonour for the purpose of ministering to his wife's desires,—Oh! who can wonder if Eleanor, herself so intelligent, so sensitive, and so just, should become an altered being under such an influence and when moved by the impulse of so much gratitude, wonder, and admiration!

And to this frame of mind was the Countess of Desborough more easily brought by the fact that her love for Ramsey had been converted into the most ineffable hatred, abhorrence, and loathing: so that she experienced an indescribable relief, amounting to the ecstacy of a pleasure hitherto unknown, in turning away as it were from the memory of an amour so gross and so fraught with shame, to find herself the object of a passion so spiritually pure, so holy, and so esthetic!

CHAPTER CXV.

LORD AND LADY HOLDERNESS.

It was six o'clock in the evening; and the domestic had just placed the dessert upon the table in the dining-room at the dwelling of Lord Holderness in Cavendish Square.

His lordship was seated with his bride in that apartment, where the thick curtains were drawn over the windows and the soft lustre shed by the lamps was reflected in the decanters filled with yellow, rosy, and dark wines. Upon the board glowed the golden orange and the rich grape of Portugal: dried fruits, sweet-cakes, and the various accessories to a dessert in winter-time likewise appeared in crystal dishes. The fire blazed cheerfully in the grate—and, to outward seeming, naught was wanting to complete the happiness of a man who had just been created a peer and who had taken a lovely young wife unto his bosom.

But he whom we so lately spoke of as Mr. Clarendon, and whom we are now to denominate by the haughty title of Lord Holderness, was not happy—no, far from it! He had obtained a wife who was ravishingly beautiful it was true: but he had lost his daughters, who were more lovely still, and who might have proved his pride and comfort in his old age. The beautiful wife he had not wooed: she had forced herself upon him;—and though but a few

days had elapsed since they were united, he had already been taught to quail beneath her imperious temper and succumb ignominiously to her despotic will. Nor was Pauline there to sooth him:—no—nor his Octavia to comfort him! He felt that he was childless—and the young wife whom he had placed at the head of his household, made not his dwelling a happy home!

During the whole of dinner-time, and while the liveried footmen were present, but little conversation had passed between the noble couple; and those remarks were of a cold and ceremonial nature. It was however evident, as the repast drew towards its termination, that Lady Holderness was becoming impatient of the restraint imposed by the presence of the domestics, and that she longed for the moment to arrive when their departure from the room would enable her to give utterance to the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind.

At length the wished-for instant came;—and as soon as the dessert was placed upon the table, in the manner already described, Fernanda looked significantly at her husband, observing, "It is now necessary that we should discuss our plans and settle the course which we intend to pursue."

"So soon—ere the honeymoon be past?" ejaculated his lordship, evidently anxious to obtain a reprieve in respect to a subject which he viewed with terror and dismay.

"You have already demanded a postponement of this conference more than once—and I have acceded to your solicitation," said Fernanda. "But five days have now elapsed since we were united to each other—and *that* period," she observed, her bright scarlet lips curling with a momentary irony, "is quite sufficient for the honeymoon of a pair who wedded under such unusual auspices and for purposes of so purely a worldly nature."

"But, my dear Fernanda," exclaimed Lord Holderness, "the peerage which I coveted, and to which you were to help me, is gained—yes, gained without your assistance: and therefore I think the least you can do is to allow me to enjoy my honours in tranquillity. For *you* have profited by my good fortune in a manner most unexpected by yourself at the moment when you became my wife."

"If you continue to talk much longer in a style which argues a cowardly, grovelling, indolent disposition," exclaimed Fernanda, her eyes flashing fire and a deep pink hue suddenly rushing to her cheeks, —"you will provoke me to upbraid you with no measured invective. But I propose that we argue the point calmly and deliberately——"

"What point, my love?" demanded his lordship, in as meek, mild, and conciliatory a tone as he could possible adopt in order to lull the gathering storm.

"The point whether you are to fulfil the objects for which we joined our hands and fortunes," responded Fernanda, with a stern emphasis. "You craved a peerage—and I sought vengeance! At that time the removal of Arthur Eaton from this world would have placed you on the threshold of your desires, and would have gratified mine at once. Therefore did we make common cause against that young man—*you* from motives of ambition, and *I* from motives of revenge!/ Well—it is true that accident has suddenly befriended *you* in a somewhat remarkable manner: for you have acquired your peerage all in a moment——"

"And without perpetrating a crime!" added Lord Holderness, emphatically.

"Ah! coward——But no—I will not taunt you yet," exclaimed Fernanda, at first starting from her seat as if to spring upon her husband with the fury of a tiger-cat—then instantaneously subduing her wrath and recovering all her external tranquillity and composure. "Yes—you have obtained your peerage," she continued, with a corresponding placidity of voice; "but I have not as yet succeeded in making the slightest advance towards the gratification of my vengeance."

"And will you not abandon it, Fernanda—dear Fernanda?" inquired the newly-created peer coaxingly.

"Now can I scarcely repress my feelings—so full of disgust, and indignation, and amazement am I at the question you have dared to put to me!" cried the lady, the sea-shell pink on her damask cheeks suddenly deepening into the liveliest crimson, and the violet blue of her eyes darkening to the intensity of the stormiest black. "Renounce my vengeance?—never!" she exclaimed, in a tone of startling fierceness and electrifying wildness. "Although married to *you*, yet my soul cherishes a deeper hatred than ever towards *him!* Yes—and it was to enable me to consummate my vengeance against Arthur Eaton all the more easily, that I became your wife!"

"But how can I aid you in your schemes, Fernanda?" demanded Lord Holderness: "and what inducement have I to assist you, even if I possess the power? You do not suppose that *I* have any sentiment of vindictiveness to appease?"

"No—but you have ambition to minister unto and avarice to gratify," responded Fernanda, recovering her tranquillity alike of voice and manner.

"Ah! I begin to understand you," murmured Lord Holderness, his wife's observation having touched in his heart the chord which she meant to reach: for if she had allowed five days to elapse ere she compelled him to enter upon the present topic, it was not through any consideration for himself, but merely that she might have leisure to probe every weakness, foible, and failing of his character.

"Listen attentively," resumed Fernanda; "and I shall prove to your satisfaction that the same result which gratifies my vengeance, forwards likewise your interest. In a word, you are still deeply concerned in the necessity of removing Arthur Eaton from our path. For although with your peerage you have obtained a pension, yet is the latter so small that it will not serve to support your rank in a becoming manner. Already do I perceive —within the five days of my sojourn in this house —that we are living at the rate of ten thousand a-year, instead of two! The carriage you set up the very morning after our marriage—the extra servants you engaged at the same time ——"

"Yes—yes—your calculations are accurate, Fernanda," interrupted Lord Holderness. "But why foresee difficulties ——"

"Because we must guard against them," promptly ejaculated her ladyship. "Let Arthur Eaton be once removed from your path, and you instantly become heir to the Marchmont estates, that peerage likewise merging in your own."

"Yes—Baron Holderness and Marchmont," said

the nobleman, in a musing tone and with a gleam of satisfaction stealing over his countenance.

"Then, may not the possessor of two peerages boldly and confidently ask for an Earldom?" cried the temptress, her beauteous features becoming radiant with the triumphant feeling which she assumed as her bright red lips poured the delicious poison into her husband's ears.

"O Fernanda!" exclaimed Lord Holderness; "you have inspired me with thoughts and aspirations which hurry me onward with a force that is irresistible—and you teach me to look upon the hideous aspect of crime as if I had been familiar with it all my life!"

"Be brave—be courageous—be bold, my dear Walter," cried the false syren, rising from her seat and throwing her white arms round her husband's neck. "Come—behave in a manner that will make me love you. When I first revealed my countenance to you the other day, you declared that I was adorable and that you could worship me. Well—give me a proof that you are really gratified by the possession of a young and handsome wife. You see that I am somewhat vain: but then I know that I *am* really beautiful."

"And what proof of my affection do you require?" asked the nobleman, snatching a few kisses, and indulging in certain little toyings provoked by the splendidly white neck and remarkably low dress of his young wife.

"I demand," she said, seating herself upon his knee and placing her lips close to his ear, so that her cheek touched his own and her rich glossy tresses swept his shoulder,—"I demand that you renounce not one tittle of the grand scheme which made us join our hands and our fortunes a few days ago;—and I demand likewise that you place implicit confidence in me, and yield entirely to my guidance in everything which I shall propose respecting Arthur Eaton."

"I promise all you ask, Fernanda," murmured Lord Holderness, bewildered and overcome by mingled feelings of voluptuousness and ambition, and also by the fear of turning this delicious calm into a violent storm.

"You promise that you will not again oppose my views?" she said inquiringly: "and you pledge yourself likewise to second them?"

"Yes, dear Fernanda," was the reply. "But will you really love me if I become thus docile and obedient towards you?—will you make me happy in this world, if I consent to dare eternal misery in the next?"

"Become all that I wish you to be," answered the lady emphatically; "and I will adore you! But if you would indeed acquire my love, Walter—if you would have me devote myself fervidly and enthusiastically to you, and you only—you must hesitate at nothing that I may suggest——"

"I will prove myself a very tiger of ferocity," murmured Lord Holderness, "if you only continue tender, affectionate, and kind as you are now."

And he strained his beautiful wife to his breast.

"The tenderness, the affection, and the kindness which I am now manifesting towards you," said Fernanda, in a soft low tone, "are mere coolness and reserve in comparison with that glowing enthusiasm which I shall testify towards you, if you keep your promise and go hand in hand with me upon the path of crime! Yes—crime, my husband—crime," she repeated, the horrible word sounding strange when wafted to the ear by the witching melody of such a voice: "for crime shall cement our love—crime shall consolidate our affections! By plunging into the abyss of crime to the same depth—so that one shall be as deeply stained as the other,—by ever keeping side by side in this enterprise of darkness and iniquity, so that one shall be neither before nor behind the other,—by establishing, in a word, a perfect equality in our ominous career, we shall reciprocate the same regard—exchange the same amount of attachment—and have our hearts knit together by ties as firm on the one side as on the other. And when we have learnt to love each other in this manner and upon this system," continued Fernanda, her hideous sophistry flowing all the time in strains the most liquid and charming to the ear, as the pearly stream which the enemy has poisoned glides on into the heart of the besieged city,—"then will you find that I am capable of adoring you with an adoration such as woman never bestowed on man before—that I will lavish upon you the tenderest caresses, even as I will surround you by the most delicate and unwearied attentions—and that whether in the sentiment of love or in the voluptuousness of amorous enjoyment, I will so envelop your mind in blissful fascinations and so instil into your soul a sense of the most ravishing delights, that you shall deem such an amount of bliss cheaply purchased by even the darkest crimes!"

"I am thine—wholly thine, Fernanda," murmured the nobleman, drinking in the poison of the honied words which his wife breathed in his ears, and now experiencing a species of intoxication from the effects of the warm, impassioned, and amorous looks which she tutored herself to cast upon him. "Wert thou a fiend in human shape," added Lord Holderness, enthusiastically, "I would say yea to everything thou mightest demand, even though it were to involve the surrender of my own soul!"

"I see that I shall soon love you far more tenderly than ever I loved Arthur Eaton in the first flush of that glowing passion which was alike my strength and my weakness," said her ladyship, still retaining her seat upon her husband's knee and not only submitting to his toyings, but likewise bestowing upon him frequent caresses in return.

"What—can you possibly love an old man like me so profoundly as you would have me believe?" asked Lord Holderness, an indistinct and very slight suspicion of his wife's sincerity flashing across his brain.

"Old!" she ejaculated, with an indignation so well assumed that it instantly destroyed his misgiving: "you are only a year or two past fifty—in your prime——"

"And you are eighteen, Fernanda!" observed the husband, now gazing with a deep but sensuous fondness upon the truly beautiful countenance of his wife.

"Oh! let us not enter upon these comparisons, my dear Walter," she exclaimed, her red lips and her white teeth shining in delicious contrast as her smile beamed radiantly upon the credulous man whom she was thus bending to her will and enthralling in her Circean meshes. "I must now give you a farther insight into my own position and likewise into my plans. Know, then, my dear husband—and you will start in dismay when I reveal the dread truth to your ears,—that I have committed a crime the

penalty of which is *death*—and that there are three people in the world who are acquainted therewith!"

"Merciful God! is this possible, Fernanda?" exclaimed her husband, shuddering all over and clasping her with convulsive violence in his arms.

"It is possible—and it is true!" returned Lady Holderness. "And now a strange and wondrous mystery is about to be unfolded to you, Walter. For that malady which was silently, noiselessly, and unaccountably carrying Arthur Eaton to the tomb, and from which he has recovered as marvellously and even far more speedily,—that malady, I say, was a slow poisoning—and I was the poisoner!"

"You!" ejaculated the husband of this terrible woman.

"Yes—I! And now do you abhor me, Walter?" she demanded, in a tone so sweet and plaintive in its half-reproachfulness, that it could only be compared to that fragrant zephyr of orient climes which carries perfume to the sense and pestilence to the heart.

"Abhor you! Oh! no—no," exclaimed the infatuated Lord Holderness. "But continue, Fernanda—continue! We are to become criminal together—and our love is to equal the crime which is to cement it! Then, continue, I say—and let me see how far you have gone already, so that I may hasten to emulate you. You observed that three persons were acquainted with your guilt in respect to Arthur Eaton?"

"Yes—three persons, all or any one of whom can therefore give up my life to the hangman at any moment," said Fernanda, with a coolness which was remarkable considering the nature of the communication she was making.

"And those three persons?" demanded her husband. "Who are they?"

"In the first place, there is Arthur Eaton himself," replied Fernanda. "Secondly, there is his valet, William Dudley;—and thirdly, there is an old midwife named Lindley, who sold me the poison."

"And Arthur is aware that you thus sought his life?" exclaimed Lord Holderness, gazing upon Fernanda with mingled amazement and incredulity.

"He discovered the secret of his malady," she answered, in a tone that convinced her husband she was speaking the truth: "and by the same means that he found out the bane did he arrive at the antidote."

"Then how know you, Fernanda," exclaimed the nobleman, becoming suddenly and seriously alarmed,—"how know you that he has not communicated the secret to others? Perhaps his father, Lord Marchmont—or your relatives, the Earl and Countess of Desborough—or Lord Montgomery, your cousin——"

"Tranquillise yourself on that head," interrupted Fernanda. "Not one of all those whom you have mentioned, ever dreams of such a thing. Arthur Eaton has kept the secret—religiously and faithfully kept it: nay, more—he has pardoned William Dudley, and, as you are doubtless aware, still retains the man in his service."

"But such generosity as this——" began Lord Holderness.

"Is not sufficient to turn me from my purpose," remarked Fernanda, with an abruptness that overawed her husband in a moment and hushed the remonstrance that was still trembling upon his tongue. "You have now heard a secret which makes you aware of my real position. At the hands of Arthur Eaton I fear little—if anything at all—as matters stand at present: but his valet and the old woman might, in a moment of inadvertency—or under the influence of a death-bed repentance—compromise me cruelly."

"Yes—I perceive that you are fully and completely in their power, my poor Fernanda," said Lord Holderness. "But what do you propose to do?—where is the remedy? Tell me, my beloved wife," he continued, still toying with her—still receiving her caresses in return,—"tell me what you would suggest and how I can help you."

"It is serious—is it not?" observed Fernanda, inquiringly

"Yes—far too serious not to require immediate attention," answered the infatuated noble. "But what do you propose in respect to that valet and the midwife?"

"To place a seal upon their lips for ever?" rejoined her ladyship, solemnly.

"Ah!" ejaculated her husband, with a convulsive start. "And that seal——"

"The silence of death!" added Fernanda, in a deep tone—as if her heart were a cavern and the voice came from the profundity thereof.

"Two murders!" said Lord Holderness, straining her convulsively to his breast. "Oh! Fernanda, Fernanda—I shall be blest by thy love on earth—but through thee shall I be accurst hereafter!"

"The present suffices for our thought, because we know that it exists," exclaimed the terrible young woman whom he had thus feelingly apostrophised: "but all that regards the future is vague—dim—uncertain—doubtful. We feel that we exist now—but we are not sure that we shall exist hereafter!"

"O Fernanda! let us not add the crime of infidelity to the catalogue of guilt already perpetrated or about to be committed!" cried the nobleman, now shuddering more violently than at first. "Ask me to peril my soul—and I will do it: but ask me not to deny that I have a soul thus to endanger!"

"I will not again shock your prejudices, my dear husband," said Lady Holderness, with a slight accent of irony in her tone, soft and melting though her voice continued to be. "But you perceive, Walter—you perceive, I repeat, that to ensure my safety, William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley must die!"

"Yes—they must die!" echoed the nobleman, pressing his quivering lips to those cheeks that were now flushing with a feverish excitement.

"And in the death of *one*," said Fernanda, with a terrible light flashing in her eyes, "shall my vengeance begin against Arthur Eaton!"

"I do not understand you," observed her husband. "That one to whom you allude——"

"Is William Dudley," she replied.

"And how will *his* death forward your design in respect to Eaton?" asked Lord Holderness.

"You shall see, Walter—you shall see!" exclaimed Fernanda, her countenance becoming animated with the glow of a fierce and savage triumph. "We will drink some champagne together—and then, while our blood appears to run like lightning in our veins, I will unfold to you all my schemes—all my projects. And, oh! be assured, Walter,

that my vengeance against Arthur Eaton shall be terrible—very terrible!"

"When do you purpose to take the first step towards the execution of all this?" inquired the nobleman.

"To-morrow, Walter—to-morrow!" was the emphatic response.

"To-morrow!—so soon?" he cried.

"Yes—to-morrow," rejoined Fernanda. "And now I shall surprise you by stating that the preliminary step is for us to call at Lord Marchmont's mansion in Hanover Square."

"But we know that his lordship is out of town at this moment," exclaimed the newly-created peer: "and surely you do not wish to see his son—Arthur Eaton—the object of your bitter hatred and burning vengeance?"

"It is precisely because Lord Marchmont *is* absent from home," said Fernanda, "and because we shall be received by Arthur Eaton only, in his father's absence,—it is precisely for these reasons, I repeat, that we must call in Hanover Square to-morrow."

"And you intend to court this interview with him whom you regard as your mortal enemy?" exclaimed Lord Holderness, gazing upon his wife in mingled surprise and alarm. "Surely you do not contemplate a sudden and open act of violence against him?"

"Oh! do not imagine that I am so insane—so incensate!" ejaculated Fernanda. "No, Walter—it is to make my peace with Arthur Eaton—to assure him of my forgiveness—to demand *his* pardon likewise—and to propose a sincere friendship for the future,—it is for all these purposes that I shall seek an interview with him to-morrow!"

"Incomprehensible woman—what do you mean?" cried her husband, now utterly bewildered.

"I mean to render my vengeance the more certain and my own safety the more secure!" was the deep-toned, subdued, and significant reply. "But now let us ring for champagne, my dear Walter," she cried, starting from his knees and resuming her seat: "and then—while the blood boils in our veins and excess of rapturous feelings enables us to contemplate crime with indifference,—*then*, my lion-hearted Walter, will I—your tiger-cat—unfold my projects to your ears!"

And Lord Holderness rang the bell for the exhilarating juice of Epernay;—and then his eyes remained fixed with mingled delight, and awe, and terror upon that countenance whose ravishing beauty so strangely belied the aspect of the hidden soul—and he felt indeed that he had taken unto his bosom the most dangerous of serpents with the loveliest of skins!

CHAPTER CXVI.

PHILANTHROPY.—THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE PLOT.

By referring to the fiftieth chapter in this narrative, the reader will find that when the Hon. Arthur Eaton manifested so remarkable a forbearance and so unparalleled a generosity towards William Dudley, whom he had detected in the very act of entering his room for a murderous purpose, he received from the penitent valet all the ill-gotten gains acquired by his subserviency to the criminal views of that tigress-woman Fernanda. On the occasion thus alluded to, Mr. Eaton had said to Dudley, "For the present I will take charge of those wages of iniquity: to-morrow I will tell you how they shall be employed! Retire to your own chamber—and fear not that I shall treat you with severity. No—it is my purpose to afford you every opportunity of making your peace with heaven and becoming an useful member of society."

And what was the project which the philanthropic young gentleman had in view?

The case of his own repentant servant made him reflect upon the fact that many and many a sinner may be rescued from the paths of iniquity and redeemed from utter perdition, if instead of being hunted to desperation as an outcast of society, the genial influence of kind treatment and reformatory measures be adopted. For he felt that had he thrust William Dudley forth into the world, penniless, friendless, and characterless, the man must have perforce continued in the career of turpitude in order to obtain a meal and a bed. But saved from this deplorable catastrophe, the chances were ninety-nine to one that he would thenceforth shun vice on account of the perils to which it leads, and embrace virtue for its own sake.

These reflections led the Hon. Arthur Eaton to a more comprehensive consideration of the subject;—and it struck him that if some means of reformation and redemption were applied to those unhappy wretches who, under the influence of pinching penury, have committed a first offence, a large proportion might be rescued from total ruin and reclaimed as honest members of society. For he asked himself how it was possible that the miserable youth or the desperate man, when sent adrift from a felons gaol at the expiration of the term of imprisonment, could strike into the path of rectitude—turn at once to honest toil—and eat the bread of a meritorious industry! No—it was impossible! From the prison-gates do those beings come forth as destitute as when they committed the crime which sent them thither—clothed in rags—friendless—with the brand of Cain upon their brows—and compelled to feel all the anguish, misery, and pinching want inseparable to their outcast state, with the only alternative of thieving again to amend it! For the tyrannical Government and the barbarian laws of this oppressed and wretched country, have studied only how to punish, persecute, crush, scourge, and trample down—but never to save, reclaim, rescue, and raise up. There are ten thousand enactments by which a poor man may be hanged, transported, or imprisoned—but not one by which he may have the slightest chance of being reformed. So much for the *blessings* of ignorant aristocratic institutions.

From all this it appeared to Arthur Eaton that an establishment should be founded for the reception and temporary employment of those misdemeanants and felons whom the gaol is daily vomiting back again into that society which discards them as outcasts,—an establishment where these friendless wretches might have immediate work given them, in return for which they would receive food and lodging until a sufficient period elapsed to test the sincerity of their penitence and place them in that frame of mind when some humane masters and employers might no longer hesitate to admit them on their land or in their workshops.

Acting upon these philanthropic views, the Hon. Arthur Eaton lost no time in purchasing a considerable piece of ground in the district which is now known as Pentonville, but which consisted of open fields at the period whereof we are writing;—and on that tract did he speedily set bricklayers and carpenters to work to raise a convenient and spacious building for the object which he had in contemplation. The "wages of crime" surrendered up by William Dudley, went a considerable way towards the purchase of the land; and the valet was rejoiced when his master unfolded to him the use to which it was to be appropriated.

It was moreover resolved by Mr. Eaton that his penitent valet should be the superintendent of the institution when the edifice was completed.

As he did not wish either to obtrude his humane designs upon the public notice, or to incur the annoyance of having his scheme made the topic of endless, varied, and conflicting speculations before its efficacy had even been put to the test, he shrouded the real objects of the building in as much secrecy as possible: but he encouraged the operatives to use the utmost despatch in raising the structure—and thus, in the course of a few weeks, considerable progress had been made.

During that interval, Arthur Eaton had seldom missed a day in visiting the scene of his intended experiment;—and very frequently of an evening, when the bricklayers had left off work, would he repair thither with William Dudley, and explain by the light of a lantern the objects of the various architectural arrangements which were thus rapidly developing their features as the several partitions rose within the circuit of the outer walls.

We have now given a rapid sketch of the aims and pursuits that occupied the Hon. Arthur Eaton during the period which had elapsed since that memorable night when he frustrated the murderous purpose that took William Dudley and Fernanda to his bed-chamber.

But was Fernanda a stranger to these pursuits? No: far from it. In various disguises had she watched Eaton's movements from time to time; and more than once had she overheard, when concealed in the building, the explanations which he gave to William Dudley. The young gentleman's philanthropy she looked upon as the most sickly sentimentalism; and the valet's deep contrition she regarded as a maudlin sanctimoniousness. Towards the former she continued to entertain the fiercest hatred: towards the latter she had conceived the most profound disgust. She likewise considered Dudley as a traitor to her cause;—and thus, while nourishing schemes of diabolical vengeance against the master, she worked herself up to a pitch of rancorous excitement against the man.

Having placed upon record the preceding observations, we now resume the thread of our narrative,—only requesting the reader to bear in mind the discourse which took place between Lord and Lady Holderness, as related in the preceding chapter.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the scene just alluded to, that the newly-created peer and his lovely bride alighted from their carriage at the door of Lord Marchmont's mansion in Hanover Square. We have already intimated that the noble owner of that sumptuous abode was temporarily absent on a visit to his country-seat;—and of this fact Lord and Lady Holderness were not only aware—but they had availed themselves of the opportunity to carry out the nefarious and deeply-ramified scheme which they now had in hand.

The Hon. Arthur Eaton was in the library when a footman entered to inform him that Lord and Lady Holderness were in the drawing-room. A glow of indescribable pleasure sprang up on the countenance of the young gentleman: for, judging others by his own generous disposition, it instantly struck him that Fernanda, having now married and settled in life, had repented of her former bitter hostility towards him and was desirous of making her peace.

To the drawing-room did he accordingly hasten;—and the hope which he had so promptly entertained, appeared to receive instantaneous and full confirmation from the air of frank cordiality and graceful affability with which Fernanda proffered him her hand. At the same time she darted upon him a look which seemed to say, "All is forgotten—let all be forgiven!"

Eaton did not of course entertain the slightest idea that Lord Holderness was aware of the peculiar nature of the intimacy which had once subsisted between Fernanda and himself: he could not possibly suppose that the young lady had revealed to her husband the loss of her chastity previously to her marriage with him;—nor did he behold in this union of his relative and his late mistress anything menacing towards himself—much less a league so formidable as that tremendous alliance of interests the most selfish and vengeance the most implacable which had in reality taken place.

It was therefore with the ease and respectful courtesy of a polished gentleman that Arthur Eaton congratulated Lady Holderness upon her marriage: and, turning towards her husband, he said, "I now have the pleasure of renewing to your lordship in words those felicitations which I have already conveyed in writing, upon your elevation to the peerage."

"I thank you, my dear Arthur," returned the nobleman, "for the letter which I received from you on the subject. I regret that your father is not at home that I might have the opportunity of expressing my gratitude towards him for his recent kindness towards me. But in surrendering the pension which he condescended to allow me," continued Lord Holderness, his tone and manner acquiring a certain degree of hauteur,—"that pension which he lately augmented so considerably,—I am bound to testify in writing the deep sense that I entertain——"

"Surely, my dear Lord Holderness," interrupted Arthur, "this is not the most suitable time to converse upon matters of business?"

"It is precisely that I may feel the true independence of sincere friendship," exclaimed the nobleman,—"that I am anxious to throw off as much as possible, and likewise as soon as may be convenient, the weight of obligation which presses upon me. This relief will my mind experience so soon as I shall have written a few words to your father. Will you oblige me with writing-materials, Arthur?"

"If your lordship be determined to make this visit one of business as well as of friendship," said the young gentleman, "I cannot resist your purpose any farther. I will therefore ring for my writing-desk——"

"Or stay!" interrupted Lord Holderness. "I will not give you so much trouble—and moreover, I would rather be alone for a few minutes while

penning the letter. Allow me, therefore, to retire to the library. I know the way——There! do not think of accompanying me any farther——"

And, gently pushing Arthur back, as the young gentleman courteously opened the door for him, Lord Holderness hurried from the apartment.

The moment the door closed behind him, the Hon. Mr. Eaton accosted Fernanda; and in a voice of deep feeling, he said, "I thank you sincerely—thank you from the very bottom of my heart for having signified by your presence here this afternoon that the past is forgotten and forgiven! The instant that I received intelligence of your marriage the other day, I longed to call—to pay my respects—to offer my congratulations—and to express a hope that henceforth we should be friends. But I was afraid——"

"You fancied that I was too vindictive ever to relent?" observed Fernanda, smiling so sweetly—so benignantly—and with such a bland expression of Christian feeling, that no human being, however intimately acquainted with her character, would have suspected for a moment that this heavenly wreathing of her lips was assumed as easily as she could put on any other appearance of hypocrisy and guile. "But since the past is forgiven," she continued, with a corresponding softness of tone, "let it also be forgotten. And now, Arthur—once more I proffer you my hand—the hand of sincere friendship."

"And once more I take it with gratitude and press it with cordial warmth," said the young gentleman, completely deceived by the words, and manner, and bearing of that lovely creature who carried the art of duplicity to a degree of such exquisite refinement.

The conversation between Arthur Eaton and Lady Holderness was then continued in a friendly strain, but upon general and indifferent topics: until the young gentleman suddenly observed, "By the bye, I have been grieved to hear that your noble relative, the Countess of Desborough, has suffered a very severe illness."

"She is convalescent now," said Fernanda.

"And the two Misses Clarendon are staying, I believe, at the beautiful little villa belonging to the Duchess of Devonshire near Aylesbury?" observed Eaton, in an interrogative tone. "At least, so I learnt a day or two ago."

"Yes—such is the case," responded Fernanda. "The Duchess has taken a great fancy to them."

In this manner was the discourse continued for nearly twenty minutes: but in the meantime how was Lord Holderness employed?

The reader has seen how artfully he contrived to get away from the presence of Mr. Eaton in the drawing-room, and thence escape to the library: but he had in view some project of far greater importance than the mere desire to pen a letter to Lord Marchmont. For the sake of appearances, however, he did write an epistle to that nobleman in the sense to which he had alluded: and as soon as he had sealed and addressed it, he stole forth from the library.

No one was in the corridor—and unobserved he ascended the staircase. Fernanda had already tutored him so well, that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in finding his way to Arthur Eaton's bed-chamber, which he boldly entered.

He was prepared for all eventualities. If any one were in that room, his answer was ready:—"he had been inspecting certain books in the library—the dust had soiled his hands—and he knew that he might take such a liberty as to seek his friend Mr. Eaton's apartment in order to wash them." Such was the apology which he had at the tip of his tongue, ready to offer in case of need: but the lie was not wanted—he encountered no one either on his way to the chamber, or in the room itself.

And in that room he did not remain a minute. What he did there, we need not at present disclose: suffice it to say that he succeeded in accomplishing the purpose which he had in view—and, chuckling inwardly, he hastened back to the library. There he remained for a short time, in order to recover a mien of perfect composure; and at length he returned to the drawing-room, where he found his wife and Arthur Eaton conversing as agreeably as if there had never been any misunderstanding between them.

Lord Holderness gave the letter which he had written into the hands of the young gentleman, with a request that it should be presented to Lord Marchmont on the return of that nobleman;—and Eaton promised not to neglect the matter, although he again expressed his regret that so much importance should have been attached to it on the occasion of a friendly visit.

The newly-created peer and Fernanda then took a most cordial and affectionate leave of the Hon. Mr. Eaton; and, returning to their carriage, they were speedily whirled away to Hyde Park, in which fashionable resort they drove until five o'clock.

At this hour they were borne back to Cavendish Square to dinner;—and when they once more found themselves alone over the dessert, Fernanda lavished the most seductive caresses upon her husband—declaring that he had acquitted himself admirably that afternoon, and assuring him that he was already the object of a love which would speedily expand into the enthusiasm of a boundless worship.

The time passed rapidly away until nine—at which hour Fernanda said, "We must now depart upon the business which we have in hand for to-night."

"I am at your orders, dearest," cried Lord Holderness; and he rang the bell for his hat and cloak, while Fernanda hastened up-stairs to put on a shawl and a black hood such as ladies wore in those times when going out of an evening.

"Has your lordship ordered the carriage?" inquired the footman who answered the bell.

"No," was the response. "Her ladyship and myself are merely going to visit some friends a few doors off—and as the night is perfectly dry and very mild, it is not worth while to have the carriage for so short a distance."

At this moment Lady Holderness returned to the dining-room, wearing an ample shawl and a black silk hood;—and, her husband giving her his arm, they sallied forth together.

But instead of repairing to the house of any friends in the neighbourhood, they hastened to the nearest hackney-coach stand; and, entering one of the vehicles, they ordered the driver to take them to the immediate vicinage of the Archbishop's palace in Lambeth. Half-an-hour's ride brought them to the end of their journey; which they alighted—dismissed the coach—and repaired straight to Fore Street.

On reaching the house of Mrs. Lindley, Lady Holderness knocked gently—and the door was immediately opened by the midwife herself. She carried a candle in her hand; and the moment the light beamed on the well-known countenance of the fair patrician, as she partially threw back the hood which she wore, the old woman gave her a respectful welcome. Fernanda then entered the parlour, followed by her husband.

That room was unchanged in its aspect since Fernanda last saw it. The shutters were hermetically closed inside the casements—the white blinds were down—the dark stuff curtains were drawn. The massive walnut-wood furniture was as funereal as ever in its ebon darkness: the pictures in their black frames imparted the same unvaried gloom to the chamber. There, too, was the old dame's easy-chair with its high back;—a good sea-coal fire was blazing in the grate, its lambent flames playing up the wide-mouthed chimney;—and, behold! there was another black cat, lazily opening its sparkling, glass-like green eyes, as it lay rolled up on the hearth-rug,—yes, *another* cat to replace the one which Fernanda had poisoned.

The midwife courteously besought her visitors to be seated: then, depositing herself in the easy-chair, she put on her great horn spectacles with the large round glasses—and her reptile-like eyes glanced inquiringly towards Lord Holderness.

"I see that you more than half suspect that this is my husband, dear Mrs. Lindley," said Fernanda, observing the significant look; "and you are right. He is aware that I passed some time in your establishment—and the manner in which I have spoken of you has induced him to become your patron."

"Hush, my dear lady—not so loud!" whispered the midwife, placing her long, thin, parchment-like forefinger to her lip: "the very walls have ears, you know! But I congratulate your ladyship upon your marriage: I saw it mentioned in the newspaper—and I was pleased to think you were so comfortably settled."

"Let us proceed to business, madam, if you please," said Lord Holderness: "for her ladyship and myself have not much time to spare."

"To business, then, my lord," observed the midwife."

"I will explain the matter as concisely as pos-

sible," said Fernanda. "His lordship has a niece—a young, charming, and beautiful girl—nobly born too—who is in a way to become a mother—and whose shame would redound upon a family with a reputation as yet unsullied. This unfortunate young creature, Mrs. Lindley, will be placed under your charge to-morrow night. But she must be introduced hither with the utmost secrecy——"

"Yes — yes — I understand," whispered Mrs. Lindley. "You need scarcely give me such precise instructions upon that head. If your ladyship will name the hour at which I may expect my new patient to-morrow night, I shall be prepared to receive her."

"We will say at eleven o'clock punctually," answered Lady Holderness. "And now let me impress upon you that the utmost precaution is to be adopted. Your servants will be all in their own rooms — the lodgers in the house will all have retired to rest—and you alone, Mrs. Lindley—remember, I say, *you* alone will be sitting up to receive the unhappy young lady whom Lord Holderness will himself escort hither at the appointed hour."

"Everything your ladyship has suggested, shall be strictly attended to," said Mrs. Lindley. "I suppose I am to understand that not even my confidential servant is to see the young lady during her sojourn in my house? I am to attend upon her myself?"

"Precisely so," answered Fernanda: "and your recompense shall be most liberal."

"Oh! that assurance is quite unnecessary from your ladyship," said the midwife. "But do you not inquire after your friend Caroline Walters?" she asked, as Fernanda rose to depart.

"Ah! I had forgotten her!" ejaculated Lady Holderness. "Is the poor girl still here?"

"Yes—but she will leave me very shortly, I believe," responded Mrs. Lindley. "Would your ladyship like to see her? She often and often speaks of you——"

"Speaks of me!" repeated Fernanda. "How?—does she know who I am?"

"No—no—heaven forbid!" cried Mrs. Lindley. "But hush!—we are both talking too loud—and walls have ears! What I meant was that poor Caroline Walters speaks of *the young lady*, as she calls you—and she wonders whether you have entirely forgotten her."

"I will come and see her in a few days—when I pay a visit to my husband's unfortunate relative," observed Fernanda. "But in the meantime do not tell Caroline Walters that you have either seen or heard anything of me."

"Your ladyship is well aware that secrecy is the very life and soul of my profession," returned the old midwife, gently repulsing the huge black cat which at the moment leapt into her lap. "But will your ladyship take some refreshment?—or his lordship? A glass of wine and a biscuit——"

"Nothing, I thank you," said the nobleman, drawing his cloak around him. "To-morrow night, as the clock strikes eleven, shall I be here—with my niece."

"To-morrow night—at eleven punctually," answered Mrs. Lindley.

Lord and Lady Holderness then took their departure.

CHAPTER CXVII.

CAROLINE WALTERS.

Not many minutes had elapsed after Fernanda and her husband had taken their leave of the midwife, when a hackney-coach stopped at the door of the sinister-looking establishment; and Mrs. Brace alighted. She was received by Mrs. Lindley on the threshold, and instantly conducted to the warm parlour, where she did not refuse the refreshment which had already been offered to Lord and Lady Holderness.

"I have come to see you this evening, my dear friend," said the handsome and robust milliner, as she sipped her wine, "because I wished to have Caroline Walters disposed of in some manner or another before I bring Rachel Forrester over to you. Rachel must come in a few days—and I do not like the idea of any two of my girls getting together under such circumstances. They are apt to compare notes and then persuade each other that they have been ill-used."

"Precisely so," observed Mrs. Lindley, who was also indulging in some wine, which made her reptile eyes gleam with an ominous light through the large circular glasses. "This Caroline Walters, especially, is a girl of remarkable spirit and strange character——"

"She who was so docile at first," cried Mrs. Brace, —"and so thankful for everything that was done for her."

"Ah! but in such a place as this," observed Mrs. Lindley, bending forward and speaking with a mysterious air and low whisper, "young women are apt to get ruminating upon their position—and then they fancy that they have been wronged——"

"Besides," added Mrs. Brace, "Caroline is half a Spaniard, and may therefore be headstrong, vindictive, and unforgiving, when once her spirit is aroused and her mind is bent upon a particular object. However, we must either coax her into compliance with my views—or else we must use coercion. Perhaps you will have the kindness to summon her?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Lindley; and she quitted the room.

In a few minutes she returned, accompanied by Caroline Walters.

The young girl—poor creature, she was but sixteen!—seemed pale and care-worn. The natural brunette richness of her complexion had yielded to a certain sallowness which indicated recent bodily suffering as well as a mind ill at ease; and there was a darkness, arising from the same causes, around her fine black eyes. Her raven hair, so luxuriant in quantity and so silky in quality, was thrust negligently behind her ears and fastened in a slovenly knot at the back of her head;—and there was no longer in her dress that neatness and precision which had once distinguished her plain though becoming garb. In fact, the aspect of the young girl denoted that the sentiment of personal vanity had been absorbed in deeper and sterner emotions.

She did not hasten towards Mrs. Brace as if she still looked on the milliner as a benefactress: but with a sullen slowness of step and a sinister moodiness of manner, she accosted her, saying, "I am glad you have come at last, madam—as I am wearied of being retained a prisoner here."

"A prisoner!" repeated Mrs. Lindley, holding up her hands with well affected amazement: "what does the dear child mean? Surely the doors have not been barred against her?—surely she has never been locked up in her own room?"

"No," exclaimed Caroline bitterly: "persecution and tyranny have not gone quite so far! But——"

"Hush, my dear child—hush!" said the midwife: "remember that the very walls have ears——"

"And it may be that they will one day find *tongues!*" returned Caroline Walters, darting a glance of ominous and dire significancy first upon Mrs. Lindley, and then upon Mrs. Brace.

"What does the girl mean?" exclaimed the latter. "My dear Caroline," she continued, assuming a tone of conciliation and tenderness, "you are sadly altered towards me. How have I offended you?—what have I done to deserve this coldness—this ingratitude—this contempt?"

"What have you done, madam, to deserve any better feelings on my part?" demanded the young girl, now fixing her large black eyes upon the milliner's countenance as if her fiery looks could pierce that lady through and through. "Oh! madam," continued Miss Walters, in a tone thrillingly wild and bitterly reproachful, "I have learnt to view things in a very different light from that in which I formerly beheld them! I now know who it was that literally sold me to the seducer—the base seducer—the nobly-born villain who wooed me with guile, won my honour with treachery, and discarded me with a corresponding heartlessness! Yes, madam—I can see through it all—all;—and I curse—aye, curse my own folly when I think that there was a time at which I believed that he really loved me! Well—what am I living for?—I who am so thoroughly unhappy—so irremediably miserable? Hope is gone—love is dead—every kind feeling is withered in my bosom: but another flame burns *there*, in the place of those lost sentiments—a flame as terrible as if it were a tongue of fire snatched from the raging furnaces of hell!"

"Almighty God! talk not in this horrible manner," cried Mrs. Brace, clasping her hands and growing pale with a real and unfeigned terror.

"Hush!—I command you to be silent—the walls have ears!" exclaimed Mrs. Lindley, gesticulating fiercely at Caroline Walters. "I implore—I beseech you to tranquillise yourself, my dear child," she added, in a more soothing tone. "You said you were a prisoner here: but I hope that you will withdraw that averment. Come, my dear love," she said more coaxingly still; "do me the justice to admit——"

"I will do *myself* and *you* the justice to tell the truth," interrupted the young girl, in a cold, stern, and implacable voice. "That the doors have not been barred against me, I acknowledge—that I might have quitted your dwelling at any moment, Mrs. Lindley, I frankly confess. But though no actual violence has been perpetrated against my liberty—yet am I retained captive by a moral thraldom equally effective and not the less heartless. For the apparel in which I could alone go forth has been hidden—and the little money I possessed has been taken away. Penniless, and without bonnet or cloak, I could not cross the threshold of your house—and you know it! To all intents and purposes, then, am I a prisoner here: and now I demand my release!"

"It was to consult with you, my dear Carry upon your future plans and prospects," said Mrs. Brace, "that I came hither this evening. Pray do not excite yourself in this fearful manner: all that has been done was for your good—and the little restraint of which you complain——"

"Well, well—take your own view of the affair madam," interrupted Caroline, sullenly: "only be quick and order Mrs. Lindley to give me my clothes and my money—and within a very few minutes I shall cease to be a charge to either of you any longer!"

"Then you will compel me to speak severely," said the milliner, her cheeks now flushing with indignation. "The fact is, Caroline Walters, that I stand in the light of a parent towards you——"

"Yes—a parent indeed!" observed the girl, with a deep, rancorous, malignant bitterness of tone and a ferocious wildness of look. "You prostituted me for gold——"

"Silence!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, rising from her seat all quivering with rage.

"Hush—I command—I implore you!" murmured the midwife. "The very walls have ears——"

"Pardon me for speaking too loudly, my good friend," said Mrs. Brace; "but we shall close this interview in a moment. Miss Walters," she continued, turning towards the young girl, "you may vent your spite—your rage—your hatred upon me to your heart's content: but I have a duty to perform towards you—and that duty shall be accomplished. Ungrateful young woman that you are, you now endeavour to lay your own frailty and immodesty at my door; and you dare to impugn my character——"

"Character, forsooth!" exclaimed Caroline, with an irony alike of tone and manner, the keenness whereof made the brazen-faced woman wince visibly. "Oh! who dares speak of character now? Look at your establishment, madam—a nest of refined, elegant, and smooth-spoken prostitutes! Look at yourself, madam—a religious, church-going, alms-giving procuress!"

"Wretch—I will tear your very eyes out!" screamed Mrs. Brace, her cheeks becoming purple and the veins on her forehead swelling as if they were ready to burst: for the young girl's taunts, though words in seeming, were daggers in sooth.

"Silence—in the name of God, silence!" said Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of abject entreaty. "You will alarm the house—the neighbourhood——"

"No—no—we will put an end to this scene at once," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "Now listen attentively, Miss Walters," she continued, assuming an imperious manner as a last effort to overawe the young girl whose conduct both alarmed and surprised her. "Do you know how stands the law with regard to us? I claim you as my apprentice—and I exact from you the obedience which you owe to one who stands in the light of a parent. Refuse me that obedience—and a magistrate will very speedily teach you what are *my* rights and *your* duties. Nay, more," added the milliner, becoming bolder as she perceived—or fancied she perceived that her words were producing the desired effect upon Caroline Walters,—"that same magistrate, if appealed to by me, will punish you for your past frailty—and there is no doubt that six weeks at Bridewell would curb your haughty and rebellious spirit into the proper compass. Now do we begin to understand each

other?" demanded Mrs. Brace in a tone of undisguised triumph as she beheld her victim cowering beneath menaces which appeared feasible enough to an inexperienced mind.

The poor girl—for a moment crushed and overwhelmed as well by fear of the threatened terrors of the law as by the consciousness of her own unfriended, orphan, and lonely position in the world—turned her affrighted looks from the flushed and angry countenance of Mrs. Brace and bent them upon the midwife, as if imploring sympathy even in that quarter. But the old hag, who had resumed her easy-chair the instant she saw that the milliner was triumphant, and who now sate in cold stern dignity, like an abbess of a rigid Order,—this old hag, we say, fixed on the young girl those reptile-like eyes that now appeared to dilate through their circular glasses, and to gleam with a ghastly and malignant expression which froze the blood in her veins and made her heart feel like ice.

Completely fascinated as it were by that undefinable hideousness of attraction—that species of awful mesmeric influence which the old woman exercised at the moment over the young girl—the latter had no power to withdraw her looks from this dread, unnatural gaze: and when, at the expiration of nearly a minute, the midwife arose slowly from her seat and with her cold, thin, sallow fingers grasped the fair, plump, warm hand of Caroline Walters, the young creature shuddered as if a snake were beginning to envelop her in its folds.

Still was she so spell-bound that she gave not utterance to a word;—and, under the influence of this tremendous fascination, she suffered the midwife to conduct her away from the room. Lamb-like and unresistingly, but swayed by a cold and seemingly mortal terror, Caroline Walters was thus led up-stairs to her own chamber: but when the door was closed upon her and she heard the key grating in the lock, the unnatural spell was suddenly lifted from off her—her senses were unchained in a moment—her blood began to boil and her brain to ferment with all the vitality of a terrible indignation—and, dashing her hand violently against her forehead, she sank upon her knees by the side of her couch, murmuring, "Vengeance! vengeance!"

CHAPTER CXVIII.

THE PRINCE OF WALES AND THE ORPHAN.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the incidents just related, that Rose Foster was seated in the bed-chamber where she was still a prisoner at Mrs. Brace's house.

The poor girl was pale and care-worn—and her whole aspect showed that she was devoured by an intense grief, alternating only with intervals of blank despair.

Three days had passed since those memorable incidents which saw her at one moment at the mercy of the Prince—then delivered by the sudden irruption of Meagles and Melmoth into the room—and then snatched away from their protection to be held a miserable captive once more, and reserved perhaps for that dishonour from which she could not now see a single avenue of escape—unless it were by the appalling path of suicide!

We shall not on this occasion undertake to describe at length the condition of mind to which bitter persecution and agonising suspense had once more reduced this poor, innocent, harmless orphan girl: suffice it to say that at the moment when we now again introduce our readers to her presence, she was seated in the bed-chamber of her captivity—alone, with the crushing companionship of her own tremendous affliction!

Suddenly she was startled by hearing the key turn in the lock—and as she sprang from her seat, the door opened. A crimson flush came and went upon her whole countenance as rapidly as the shadow of a flitting cloud passes over a field: and then, with cheeks once more colourless, but with a nervous agitation convulsing her from head to foot, she beheld the Prince of Wales enter the room. Not a cry escaped her lips: she knew that no screaming to which she might give vent, however loud it were, would bring her succour in that accursed house of iniquity;—and suddenly as a man is prompted by the instinct of self-defence to raise his arm to ward off the blow that threatens him,—so speedily did the resolution spring up in the maiden's mind to make one last effort to escape from this atrocious persecution or perish in the attempt!

"My dearest Miss Foster," said the Prince, closing the door, and keeping near it; "once again—for the last time—do I appear in your presence as a suitor. Believe me—oh! believe me, beauteous girl, when I declare that I hate and abhor myself for suffering so much cruelty to be practised towards you: but my love is stronger than my mercy—my passion dominates over my sense of justice. Now be reasonable, angelic girl—and look well at your own position. You cannot escape hence—and I am determined to make you mine! Why not surrender, then, with a good grace?—wherefore not accept the brilliant position which I offer you? Your resistance, sweet Rose, has already been strenuous, sincere, and protracted enough to satisfy the most delicate scruples of your virgin innocence: and now would you be acting wisely and prudently to make a merit of necessity. Oh! be cruel no longer, Rose—surrender at discretion—and do not compel me to have recourse to means which my soul abhors and which I should regret evermore!"

The Prince paused for a reply: but the young maiden uttered not a syllable. Nevertheless, her flashing eyes and her heaving bosom convinced him that his words had produced an effect upon her—but not that which he hoped and anticipated: for instead of melting into tears and succumbing to the force of circumstances against which she could no longer resist, her appearance showed that her mind was shocked and all her virtuous indignation provoked by the language against which she could not close her ears.

"You do not answer me, sweet girl—and you are angry," said the Prince. "Oh! wherefore treat me thus? Why do you regard me as your bitterest enemy—I, who seek to become your best friend! Neither menaces nor entreaties appear to move you: and yet you are a woman—with a woman's heart!"

"Oh! at length you compel me to answer you, vile man," exclaimed the orphan girl, her cheeks becoming crimson with indignation, and her eyes, usually so mild and benignant in expression, now suddenly flashing fire: "you compel me to answer

you, I say, because you dare level your atrocious calumnies against the entire female sex! What—do you suppose that because in the ranks of aristocracy and fashion you have encountered titled ladies whose complaisance towards yourself has only been equalled by their contempt for the poor and humble,—do you imagine that because Duchesses, Marchionesses, and Countesses have been proud to win your smiles even at the price of their virtue,—do you fancy, I say, that because you have hitherto found female honour a thing of snow which the sunlight of Royalty can melt in a moment—do you believe, on this account, that you have obtained a large experience of the mind and character of the entire sex? No, Prince of Wales—ten thousand times no! There is virtue in English women—there is honour in the hearts of British females. But not in the gilded saloons of fashion—nor in the mansions of the titled—nor in the gorgeous equipages which dash along, with Beauty lounging so languishingly inside,—no—not *there* must you look for bright specimens of female virtue! But you must seek them amongst those classes which you and your courtly sycophants despise,—the middle and the working-classes, I mean;—and there only will you find the brows that are worthy to be adorned with the white roses emblematic of purity!"

While giving utterance to this indignant defence on behalf of the majority of her sex, the beauty of the young maiden expanded into radiancy. Her forehead seemed to grow higher, and wider, and whiter—her eyes became lustrous in the extreme—her countenance glowed with a rich crimson hue—her bosom swelled and heaved as if the humble mortal were suddenly imbued with the Olympian pride of magnificent Juno—and her attitude gave indescribable dignity and grace to her entire form.

The Prince gazed upon her with rapture: he heard the language that flowed from her lips—but marked only the music without heeding the sense;—and as she stood before him, her modest loveliness rapidly appearing to expand into the glory of a goddess, his passion was excited to a pitch absolutely maddening. In his veins boiled the frenzied blood—in his heart raged consuming fires. Had the sacrifice of all his royal prospects been demanded at the moment—or had Satan suddenly appeared to propose a compact involving eternal perdition—the Prince would have yielded unhesitatingly, so long as the next moment should have assured him the possession of that lovely creature whose very innocence and resistance had rendered him all the more eager to revel in her charms!

"You talk of white roses—the emblems of purity!" he exclaimed, the last words of her sublime remonstrance alone carrying their meaning into a mind that was all in a ferment with maddened desires and licentious longings: "Oh! be thou my blushing rose—tender and soft as thou art in name——"

And, darting towards her, he sought to clasp her in his arms.

But quick as this movement on his part was, more lightly by far did the maiden spring aside—and, rushing past him, she gained the door. In another moment the Prince had turned—and his hand was upon her shoulder: but at the same instant she succeeded in opening the door—and, disengaging herself by a desperate effort from the grasp which he fixed upon her, she darted from the room.

Not a word—not a cry escaped her lips: desperation nerved her—and she knew that it was useless to raise an alarm.

Fleet as the fawn, she reached the head of the stairs, down which she was about to precipitate herself, when she beheld Mrs. Brace ascending them. An ejaculation burst from the milliner's tongue—for she instantly perceived, by the flying girl and the pursuing Prince, how matters stood.

Springing back—sweeping like lightning past his Royal Highness, whose arms were extended to clutch her—the maiden gained the stairs leading to the top of the house. Three or four steps did she ascend at a time:—the angle was turned—the next landing reached! Another flight was already more than half ascended ere the Prince, panting and puffing, had surmounted the former. But Rose runs for her honour—which is dearer to her than life!

The uppermost storey is now gained; and the young lady enters the passage whence the attics open. But it forms no part of her plan to seek refuge in either of those rooms: as well might she have remained in the one whence she has just succeeded in escaping!

A species of ladder, or rough ascent of steps, catches her eye! Joy—joy! her calculation was correct—the hope which she had entertained is fulfilled—the means of flight are there! Up that ladder she climbs—her little feet scarcely touching the steps, so glancingly do they move over them: she raises a trap door—she enters the loft at the top of the house,—that loft whence she knows there is a means of escape provided, in case of fire!

And now the glance which she flings behind her shows her the Prince just at the moment that he reaches the foot of the ladder. She lets the trap-door fall—she stoops and feels for a bolt, the loft being nearly dark: but there is no fastening—and without wasting another instant, she sweeps her eyes along the interior of the sloping roof. Her glance catches a penaile streak of light gleaming through a crevice: it is a trap-door which opens on to the top of the dwelling!

But it is fastened—and she loses a few moments in drawing back the rusty bolt. At *length* it yields—and she climbs through that trap-door opening on to the roof, just at the moment that the Prince enters the loft from the trap-door at the summit of the ladder.

The maiden pauses on the giddy height—and her looks are averted shudderingly from the yawning depth beneath: for a low parapet running along the top of the house, alone stands between her feet and destruction! One moment's giddiness—one false step—and down, down would she fall into the paved yard which separates the back of the house in Pall Mall from the back of that in St. James's Square.

She paused, we say, for an instant as she stepped forth upon the roof—and almost immediately the Prince appeared at the trap-door. Then Rose Foster stepped from the sloping roof on to the parapet—at the same instant that the Prince sprang forth on the tilings!

"Rose—dearest Rose, in the name of God! come back," he cried, in a tone so changed by dread horror that it seemed like the voice of an old man of eighty.

"No—'tis for you to go back," exclaimed the intrepid girl, every lineament of her ashy pale countenance expressing desperate resolution: "for

if you advance another step, I take Almighty God to witness that I will plunge headlong into the awful chasm below!"

Scarcely were these terrible words uttered, when Mrs. Brace appeared at the trap-door; and an indescribable consternation seized upon her as she beheld the young maiden balancing herself upon the edge of that precipice, like a bird upon a twig of the tallest tree of the forest.

"My God! my God!" murmured the milliner, the dread horror of the first instant now changing into a vertigo which appeared to whirl her round and round.

"Rose—Rose—I conjure you to return!" exclaimed the Prince, who was likewise a prey to a hideous giddiness, produced by the sight of that charming young girl hovering on the very brink of destruction.

"Dare to touch me now—and I leap into the embrace of Death!" cried Rose, her voice swelling into the pœan of a thrilling triumph—for she knew that her honour was now safe, even though its security were to be purchased by the sacrifice of her life!

And having spoken these animated words, she began to tread lightly and rapidly along the parapet—while the Prince and Mrs. Brace followed her with their eyes,—speechless horror enthralling them, and neither daring to move hand nor foot, so utterly absorbed in the frightful spectacle were they! For it seemed as if the slightest breath or the contact of a feather would cause the maiden to lose her balance and hurl her down into the abyss that yawned below.

On she went—heeding them not—treading cautiously though lightly and rapidly. She might have stepped off the parapet, back upon the roof, and thus pursued her way in comparative safety: but then the Prince would start from the stupor of consternation and spring forward in pursuit! For the risk which she was daring was the talisman that held him thus spell-bound: and therefore in her present appalling peril in one sense, lay all her chance of safety in another!

Upwards of a minute was thus passed—tremendous danger to herself and exquisite suspense to the vile Prince and the infamous woman who beheld her! On she went—the slightest giddiness or the least tripping, and she would be lost! But no—Providence watched over her thus far;—and she gained in safety the attic-window of an adjacent house!

She looked back: the Prince was standing, paralysed with horror, in the spot where she had last seen him; and Mrs. Brace was leaning half out of the trap-door, in a similar state of mind. Pursuit, then, was not to be dreaded, and, thrusting open the window, Rose Foster entered the chamber to which it belonged.

No one was there—and the maiden passed on into a passage, whence she gained the staircase. This she descended—but not without some degree of alarm lest she should be taken for a thief and summarily treated as one ere she was allowed to offer a word of explanation. Confidence, however, gained upon her as she advanced without experiencing any molestation: and she had actually descended as far as the hall without meeting a soul, when she suddenly encountered an elderly woman who proved to be a domestic in the service of the family occupying the house.

To this female did Rose in a few hurried words state enough to enlist her sympathy; and, with an observation to the effect that "she had for some time believed Mrs. Brace's establishment to be no better than it should be," the good woman hastily supplied the fugitive young girl with an old bonnet and shawl. Farther than this her benevolence could not extend: but the gift was of infinite value to Rose at that moment and under such circumstances—and her gratitude was commensurate.

Another moment—and the orphan emerged forth into Pall Mall, the good-natured domestic stationing herself upon the threshold of the door to watch that no molestation was offered from Mrs. Brace's house adjoining.

All was quiet—and the young girl escaped in safety from a neighbourhood where she had suffered so much persecution and had endured such intense anguish!

Penniless — houseless—friendless, Rose Foster sped away! And now the supernal courage which had hitherto sustained her throughout the incidents of her escape, underwent a painful reaction;—and an overpowering sense of oppression seized upon her. Her brain began to whirl—the ground appeared to tremble and rock beneath her feet—and the powers of memory failed her. She felt as if she were going mad: nor could she steady her ideas sufficiently to resolve in her mind what course she should adopt. Though ignorant of the atrocious treatment which Meagles and Melmoth had experienced at the hands of the Government, she thought not of visiting the abode of either: but she hurried on—on—through the maze of the metropolis—intent only on placing as great a distance as possible between herself and the neighbourhood in which Mrs. Brace dwelt.

The sun went down—darkness fell upon the earth—and still the unfortunate girl wandered on like one demented. At length she gained the open fields—and she was glad! But now memory began to assert its empire and her thoughts gradually grew more settled. A consciousness of her true position came upon her with overwhelming force—and, while sinking with fatigue, she saw that she was houseless, penniless, foodless! Then did she recollect Meagles and Melmoth; and bitterly, bitterly did she blame herself for not repairing at once to either of them so soon as she escaped from the milliner's house.

It began to rain — and she looked through the darkness for some light that should guide her to a place of shelter. A gleam appeared at a short distance on the left: and thitherward she bent her steps. But the light speedily vanished;—and on reaching the spot whence it had shone, she found herself close by a large building in process of erection.

Exhausted alike in mind and body, the unhappy girl dragged her weary limbs within the circuit of the walls; and, having discovered a nook which would at least protect her from the rain, she sank down there—enshrouded by total darkness!

CHAPTER CXIX.

A NIGHT OF BLOOD.

THE partially-erected structure where the orphan had thus accidentally taken refuge, was that very

establishment which Arthur Eaton had founded: and at this identical moment he was inside the building, accompanied by William Dudley. The light which Rose Foster had seen was caused by the lantern carried by the valet as his master explained to him the purport of the architectural arrangements made since they last visited the premises in this manner: and the sudden disappearance of that light may be accounted for by the circumstance of the young gentleman and his attendant passing farther into the interior of the edifice.

Thus, while the Hon. Arthur Eaton was inspecting the progress of the works, in company with William Dudley, Rose Foster was seeking a shelter from the rain in a nook of that maze of half-finished buildings. Presently a profound sleep fell upon the maiden—for, as we have already observed, she was exhausted alike in mind and body.

But presently a wild cry—the appalling cry of "Murder!" ascended from the midst of the edifice; and Rose started up in horror. For a moment she fancied that she had been dreaming: but this idea was instantaneously dissipated by the loud lamentations which, coming from the interior of the building, smote her ear; — and, seized with a mortal terror, the wretched girl fled precipitately.

It chanced that some labourers, returning home from their work, were passing by the place at that moment; and they were alarmed by the rending cry of "Murder"—a cry always dreadful, but doubly hideous when thrilling through the darkness. They stopped to listen—loud lamentations followed: and by these were they assured that the former cry was neither a delusion on their part nor a mischievous jest on that of others.

Towards the building they accordingly hastened—and in a few moments they encountered some one flying as if on the wings of the wind. Under such suspicious circumstances, and with the cry of "Murder" still sounding in their ears, they laid violent hands on the fugitive. This was Rose Foster;—and, with a thrilling scream and a desperate struggle, she endeavoured to tear herself from the grasp of the men—for so confused and bewildered was she by the abrupt manner in which she had been startled from her sleep, and so completely had terror gained possession of her, that in the wild chaos of her ideas it was no wonder if she fancied herself to be falling into the power of emissaries sent out by the Prince or Mrs. Brace to capture her. But the resistance thus offered on her part, only tended to confirm the suspicions of the labourers; — and, despite of her piercing shrieks and her violent struggles, they dragged her into the interior of the buildings. Thence did the bitterest lamentations still emanate; —and in about a minute the appearance of a light guided the men, with their screaming captive, to the spot where an appalling spectacle met their view!

Upon the ground lay William Dudley, weltering in his gore and quite dead—while in his breast still appeared the instrument wherewith the fatal blow had been struck by an assassin hand. And bending over the corpse, in a frantic state, was Arthur Eaton —clasping his hands wildly and rending the air with his passionate lamentations.

The lantern stood upon the ground, and lighted this scene of mingled horror and woe!

'Roused by the rush of many feet and the dreadful shrieking of the half-maddened Rose Foster, Arthur Eaton turned towards the party; and the instant that he beheld *a female dressed in black* amidst the men he sprang forward, exclaiming, "Behold the murderess!"

Then a shriek—louder, longer, more piercing, and more thrilling than all the rest—burst from the lips of Rose Foster;—and she fainted in the arms of the men who held her in their grasp.

When she awoke to consciousness, she was in the infirmary of Clerkenwell Prison.

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The scene changes to Fore Street, Lambeth.

Three hours had passed since the terrible tragedy enacted in the half-finished buildings at Pentonville; —and it was now about a quarter past eleven on this memorable night.

From a back room on an upper storey of Mrs. Lindley's house a young female stole noiselessly forth, bearing a candle in her hand;—and descending the stairs in breathless silence, she opened the door of the midwife's parlour.

But to her surprise and alarm, lights were burning within—and the great black cat, springing wildly forth, swept madly past the affrighted girl. Caroline Walters—for she it was—felt herself suddenly seized upon by a vague and unknown terror; and staggering against the door-post, she threw her startled looks around the room.

And—O horror! upon what appalling object did they settle?

Upon the carpet was stretched the old midwife—a ghastly corpse!—and bathed in the blood that was still flowing from her neck.

For an instant Caroline Walters stood gazing spell-bound and transfixed to the spot with dread horror:—then, urged by the impulse of an indescribable terror, she turned to fly from the awful scene.

But on the stairs she encountered the two servants of the establishment; and, overcome by her horrified feelings, she gave vent to a loud scream and fainted in their arms.

When she regained her senses, she was in a hackney-coach and in the custody of two constables, who were conveying her to Horsemonger Lane Gaol on a charge of being the murderess of the midwife!

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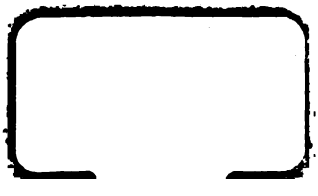
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